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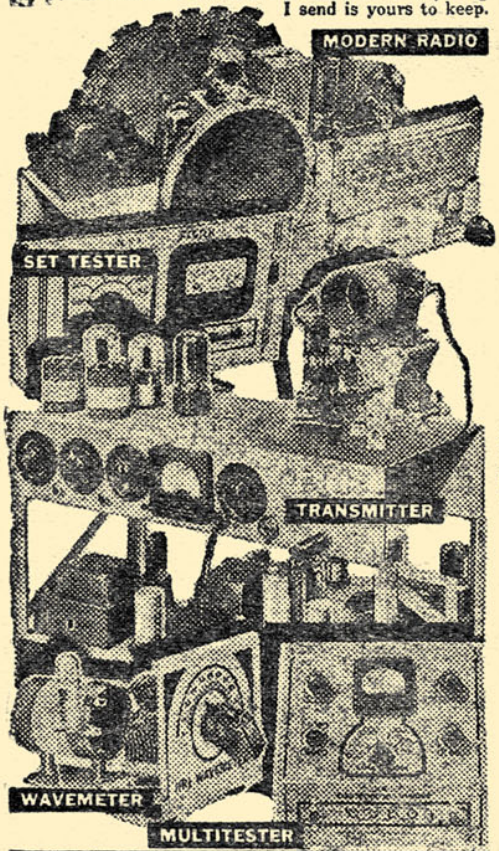

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INTRODUCTION

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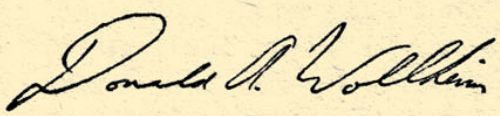
As you can see, OUT OF THIS WORLD ADVENTURES is not just "another magazine" but is an innovation in the realm of science-fiction. It combines the modern techniques of the full-color pictorial story with the best of the established fiction-magazine presentation, to achieve a new effect in fantasy.

In this initial issue, we have brought you an assortment of the better writers. We tend to stress the celestial frontiers rather than the mundane background, in the feeling that space flight will prove to be the most exciting stimulant to adventure and progress yet to come—and we think that the age of space flight is rapidly dawning.

Above all, we want to give you, the imaginative fantasy-reading public, the type of stories and illustrations you best desire. You are invited to write to the editor and tell him your thoughts on this first number and your suggestions for improvement. We assure you that every letter will receive our careful attention and that we shall make all possible improvements in accord with readers' desires. The most interesting letters will be published in a regular department, beginning in the next issue.

So here's OUT OF THIS WORLD ADVENTURES—read it, enjoy it, and if you like it, tell us . . . and tell your friends too.



Donald A. Wollheim
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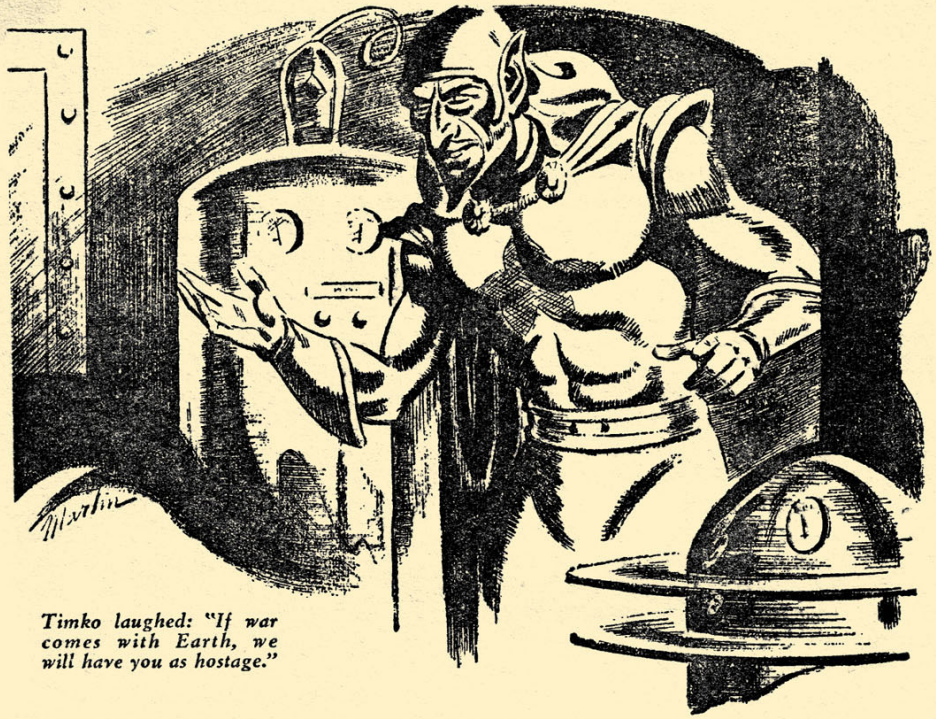
THE PLANET-SMASHERS

By Ray Cummings



Timko laughed: "If war comes with Earth, we will have you as hostage."

Jac Hart followed his kidnapped fiancee to the mystery cabins of a Venus air-liner. That enemy controlled flier was scheduled to circle the Second Planet exactly at midnight—and Jac learned that if the ship's demon crew had their way, no day would ever dawn on that doomed world!

CHAPTER I

The Scarlet Festival

THE MOMENTOUS and terrifying series of incidents began near the midnight climax of the Scarlet Festival. It was about eleven P. M. when I stopped to get Dianne. In Venta the festival is annually held in the blue-water grove at the edge of the city, and from Dianne's nearby home we went there on foot.

My name is Jac Hart. Nothing much of me is important to this narrative. I was born in Great-New York, the Earth; and with legal status at twenty, I gained the assignment as Junior Secretary to Earth's representative in Venus of the Triplanetary Union. I had always liked Venus, its way of life, its people, artistic, naturally gay, pleasure-loving. Descended from the earliest Latin settlers from Earth upon this then uninhabited planet, they were softened and yet enriched through five hundred years here in the lush climate and beauty that is Venus. And it was here in Venta that I met Dianne Donaldson, youngest daughter of Earth's present Ambassador. Love had ripened between us; we hoped to be married soon.

It was only a short walk from Earth-Embassy to the blue-water grove. A gay, holiday spirit was upon everything. The air of Venus is always warmly redolent with the perfume of the tropic blossoms, but tonight there was a spice in it, exotic incense to stir the senses wafting here from the festival as it drifted on the softly stirring breeze. Overhead, once we get beyond the thickly flowered Embassy gardens, the Venus mist-sky gleamed with the glorious mingled tints of the lights down in the festival grove. The colored search-beams were rainbow fingers moving and twining above us in the sky.

As we walked, the night breeze stirred Dianne's long black cloak so that her transparent festival robe was suffused with the blue and red and orange of the sky.

"You're very beautiful, Dianne."

She laughed gaily, squeezing my arm. "It's the spirit of the night, Jac. But it's nice to have you say so."

Now, as the descending thicket paths were converging upon the

grove, other arrivals were visible ahead of us and to the sides—young men and laughing girls, their gay voices mingling in a babble of anticipation.

"Let's take a punt-boat, Jac," Dianne suggested. "Just the two of us."

It was our first festival since we became engaged—the comparative isolation of a small craft would let us be spectators rather than participants.

"Yes," I agreed. "Good idea—the boathouse, I think it's off here to the left."

We turned that way. The winding canals with tiny thicket-islands in their loops, from here were like tangled colored threads. Beyond the nearer patch of them, the big central lagoon was blood-red under the changing lights now—with little dark moving dots which were the boats upon it. To the right, from one of the big white pavilions where the crowds were eating, drinking and dancing, the soft music of an orchestra was audible—the plaintive strings of the native Venus instruments rising and falling with sensuous melody.

AT THE BOATHOUSE there seemed still to be some small boats available. I clung to the flushed and laughing Dianne, trying to fend off the plucking youths who were pelting her with blossoms as we pressed forward. Now, as the midnight hour was approaching, the festival was at its height. . . .

From an island pavilion just across from us a group of young girls came running. Their cloaks fell from them; with long hair flying and white limbs flashing in the colored dimness, they ran for the water and plunged in. . . . Showers of flowers, tossed by the admiring fringe of youths, came hurtling out from the mossy banks at them as they swam. . . .

Every island thicket now held love-making couples. . . . We stood watching for a moment. Occasionally some of the swimming girls would land at the dotted islands, only to be rushed upon so that with squeals of laughter and simulated terror they would turn and plunge back again. . . .

"I have a punt-boat for you and the young lady here." The boathouse attendant stood obsequiously beside us. "Of what size would you wish?"

We turned to follow him down the jammed boathouse length. The rest-tables here were crowded with merrymakers, everyone gazing at Dianne, few at me, save to note me as her protecting escort.

Then as we stood at an interior corner of the boathouse, where the clothes racks made a fairly secluded recess, Dianne handed me her cloak and hood. She stood revealed, her dark hair bound on her head, the filmy pale-blue robe draped in folds about her slim white figure, with golden ropes crossing the breast and tasseled belt-ends dangling from her waist. She stood brushing the flower-petals from her hair and neck while I turned away to rack her cloak and hood in the small row of public locks near at hand.

"You are more beautiful than them all, Dianne. And don't tell me it's just because I see you through the rose glasses of a lover's illusion! That's nonsense. It's because—"

The words died on my lips. Dianne wasn't here! For that instant I stood more puzzled than startled.

"Dianne—" Had she darted behind some of these garments, with the impish spirit of the Scarlet Night merrymaking upon her so that she was hiding, waiting for me to find her and drag her forth, like the maidens hiding in the bosks of the islands of the lagoon?

"Dianne—I see you—come out of there!" But I didn't see her, and

there was no answer to my calls.

The boatman came back from the slanting apron at the water's edge. "Your boat is ready, Sirrat."

"Oh—thank you. My companion—she was here just a moment ago—I can't imagine—"

His swarthy Venus face carried a faint smile. Respectfully he suppressed it, but his dark eyes under the heavy black browns were twinkling. "Could it be the little Sirrata found more attraction in someone who seized her? There is lightness of heart tonight. It means not too much, Sirrat. I will hold the boat. She will be back."

But we were fairly secluded here in the recess, nor would any of the gay and laughing youths have trespassed upon us. Or if one had, surely Dianne would not voluntarily have fled with him. And resisting him, I would have heard her least outcry since I had been only a few feet away.

THE BOATMAN and I searched the recess. A little dagger of fear now was stabbing into me. I sent the boatman away. Hurriedly, with growing puzzlement and apprehension, I moved among the crowd out in the open boathouse. There was no sign of her. Then I searched outside.

There was a small open door oval near where Dianne had been standing in the recess. I went out through it. There was shrouded dimness here, with a little path and the blue thickets crowding close and the pale blue-white sand of the ground gleaming beneath them.

"Dianne—"

My call, unanswered, floated away. Then I stood startled, gazing down at a small oblong object lying here on the ground. It was Dianne's purse.

The sight of it as I picked it up, identified it, with her familiar flowing signature embossed upon it, brought a flood of conjectures. Puzzling. I knew she carried her purse strapped under her cloak. I would have assumed it was there in the lock-rack. Why had she removed it to carry with her in the boat? Because there was something in it too important to be trusted in the lock-rack?

When I opened the purse, there at once I seemed to find the answer. Among the litter of cosmetics there was a sealed envelope; but what caught my attention was a small square of stiff paper. I took it out of the unsealed envelope. A flight ticket! I stared at it in the dim sheen of the colored eave lights of the boathouse. It was a Class One ticket for tonight's flight of the Eq-2. Encircling the planet in 24 Venus hours, this passenger plane traveled in a perpetual midnight zone, with each of its stops exactly at the Zero Hour. It would depart from the Venta air-run at midnight, half an hour or less from now!

Why had Dianne planned to take the flyer on tonight's flight? Why hadn't she mentioned it to me? Surely it was so unlike Dianne! I stood stricken. Yet all I could think of was to get to the air-run and seize her, stop her if need be.

There was no time now to stand pondering it, and across the background of my consciousness there was the frightening realization that all my wild thoughts were implausible. Of her own volition, going to the flyer with her ticket in the purse, would she have dropped the purse so carelessly and not even missed it? Under what stress—or duress—she might have been I could only shudderingly imagine.

Within a minute now I was rushing from the blue grove. Out by the entrance I found a small taxi-flyer station.

"I've got to get the Eq-2 at midnight," I told the attendant. "I hadn't

realized it was so late. Hurry now—don't argue about it." I showed him my identifying papers. "You will put the charge to me through the Triplanetary Union. I'll leave your car at the air-run. You can send and get it. Hurry now."

"Of course, Sirrat." He hastily wheeled out the little single seater. I jumped in, and in a moment the 'copters were drawing me upward.

I had risen hardly half a thousand feet, with the upper radiance of the festival grove painting me with its lurid sheen, when suddenly from down on the ground a pencil-beam of stabbing vibration darted up at me! A pistol-ray, trying to beam me down! I caught the source of it—a clump of thickets off to one side of the taxi station from which I had risen!

The first shot missed me. I swooped with a drop, and now a second one went wild, stabbing up through the night to where only an instant before my little taxi-flyer had been. Then I leveled off again, and with full power slid circling out over the festival grove.

There was no third shot; I was alone up here in the redolent airdrift of the languorous Venus night. But now my wondering perturbation over Dianne had mounted into the reality of terror. She and I surely had been watched and followed there in the festival—trailed by such desperate antagonists that openly they would fire on me to bring me down, probably kill me. I had escaped them. But what of Dianne?

CHAPTER II

Diabolic Plot

IN A MOMENT the dwindling splash of rainbow which was the blue-water grove was behind me. Beyond it the lights of Venta City were a diffused patch in the haze of darkness. Already I was dropping down upon the air-run field. The Eq-2, in Venta, takes off from its own private departure port, off to one side of the official and public field. I could see that I was still in time; the great cylinder of gleaming silver, with its spreading banks of disc wings, its 'copters, jet ports and propellers, and the glistening convex upper surface of the glassite deck-dome, stood like an eager but quiescent monster in its rack, ready for flight.

But I had only a minute or two to spare as I dropped the single-seater into a public landing cubby, leaped from it and ran. I ignored the check-in portal and reached the foot of the small ascending run at the side of the flyer. A Venus fellow, slim, swarthy and a head shorter than myself, with a stiff uniform and a peaked cap of gold denoting that he was the Eq-2 booking purser, barred my way.

"No bookings now. It is too late."

He tried to shove me back, but I resisted. "I'm going," I said. "Perhaps only to Carolah. But I'm going."

"No," he said.

"You're wrong." Warning buzzers were sounding. The faces of two or three of the Eq-2 crew showed at the entrance door. I shoved at the dapper little purser. "Get out of my way."

"Special flight tonight," he said. "There are few passengers, mostly it is freight."

"Triplanetary Union," I said. "Important business. If you want to lose your job—" But I was in no mood for argument. In a moment I was scuffling with him. It seemed then that somehow there was something queer about this purser. Just a fleeting impression and I had no time to think of it. For that moment briefly he tried to resist me.

He was mumbling under his breath. I thought I saw him fling a glance

up to one of the watching crew, then suddenly he yielded and I dashed on board. He came up himself a moment later; the pressure portal slid closed after him.

THE SILVERY metal catwalk here beyond the entrance portal, momentarily was empty. I shoved past the few crewmen who were loitering about. They gazed, but did not try to stop me. Was Dianne on board? I didn't see her.

Now the great flyer was throbbing as the 'copters lifted her. In a narrow corridor of the cabin superstructure, I gazed into several of the dimly tubelit cabins. Most of them were empty. There was no sign of Dianne.

On one of the narrow side decks of the three hundred foot liner, a level below the upper dome, I stood at a bullseye port, momentarily gazing out. We were still rising through the heavy, almost perpetual cloud blanket of the Venus lower atmosphere which shrouds all the planet—rising like an accelerating rocket as the giant 'copters pulled us. Already the lights of Venta had dwindled to a pinpoint and then were gone in the mist.

We were beginning to level off now, and I could feel the banks of propellers thrusting us and see the flow of mist sucking around the tiered discs of the great jutting wings, sucking and flowing past with our forward movement. In a great sliding ascent we were mounting, with the 'copters and propellers stopping and the huge jets coming on until in another moment we had burst upward through the mist blanket, and the purple sky with its myriad blazing stars spread overhead.

I turned from the catwalk deck, found an empty little cabin and sat down, with cold sweat bathing me, spewed by the agony of my indecision. Did I expect to come upon Dianne, laughing and gay, walking or standing around somewhere here on the flyer? I knew that was idiotic. Should I question the surly purser? Surely he would know if she had come aboard. But there had been something very queer about that purser!

Sitting there I found myself opening Dianne's purse again. Beyond the ticket for the Eq-2 flight, and the cosmetics and such, there was only a small amount of money, and that sealed note envelope. It was unaddressed, a blank envelope, crudely sealed. The face of it was smudged and dirty. I tore it open. Within was a folded sheet, closely, crudely written upon with an etch-burn pen. I gazed at it; began reading. And then I sucked in my breath with my heart pounding as I read. It began:

"Dear Lady-Siratta—"

I turned to the etched, scrawled ending, nameless as it finished:

"So always as if should we continue to live, you will know I am,

Your grateful friend now in terror."

I am no linguist. My native English, so like the soft and musical slurring of it here in Venus that they are almost the same, was fully sufficient to my needs.

In my 'teens, once with my father, we spent a year or so in Ferrok-Shahn, the Mars capital. I learned a little of the clipped and guttural Martian then. But not much. Mars and its people never were to my liking. A totally separate race, the Martians. Despite that they are not too dissimilar in physical aspect—gray-skinned, angular and parched, most of them—by nature the contrast is enormous: their arrogance, their fundamental conception that each of them is in personal alliance with the Creator—his favored child whose ways are blessed always with Rightness. . . . I disliked it intensely. But

I did learn a little of the Martian tongue.

This scrawled note to Dianne, I found now to be a curious mixture of English, Venusian and Martian. And it was illiterate as well. I deciphered it, with its horrifying import sinking into me as I read. But I can give it here only in English, the sense of it and perhaps the vague feeling of its earnest terror:

"Dear Lady-Sirrata—There was a time when maybe it is you do remember not, but dear Lady-Sirrata you and your father was very kind to this poor wretch, who then as always was greatly in trouble. Especially you, Sirrata, and never will I that forget. I am just in my blood a poor Martian with all his days most of them were spent in the prison at Ferrok-Shahn. Now because your dear father made it so, happy I have been here in Venus, as a free man and a little work to do, which sometimes I do. So really I am Martian, but in feeling I am for Venus, and for of course Venus's always ally and friend, the Earth.

"Now there is something terrible which I have learned, because I am a Martian and I listen much to what I hear around me. A thing terrible, Sirrata, so I tell to you for your father at once to do something to fix it or surely now we all die. . . ."

I went cold as I read it—a plot by Mars to destroy the planet of Venus! Always the Earth and Venus had been a two-to-one alliance against Mars. It had been, indeed, the only thing which had held back the Martian ambition for war. We had always known that, of course, a little smug and secure, yet not too much so. Martians could not colonize Venus, any more than they could infiltrate the Earth. Everywhere they were disliked. No chance for them ever to make an ally of Venus, so that now they would destroy it!

GRIM AND ghastly plot! A thing gigantic, the future of three worlds, yet here it was, reduced to the essence of its diabolic simplicity, lying here in my lap, concentrating here in the Eq-2 as we sped forward in the starlight. The life or death of a great world, with fate thrusting its destiny now into my hands—fate thrusting Dianne and me so suddenly into the core of it.

This crew on board the Eq-2 tonight were Martian spies, not Venusmen! It was the climax of the plot which for months, perhaps years, had been maturing with all the grim and gruesome efficiency of Martian tradition.

In each of the leading Equatorial cities of Venus, atomic bombs already had been placed! A ring of them around the Equator—bombs of inconceivable power, the result of these many hundreds of years of atomic fission since its original portentous discovery on Earth. They were bombs adjusted with directional charges so that their entire force would be directed downward at the core of the planet! Firing simulanteously, the world-girdling series of atomic dagger thrusts would split the planet in two, shatter it to bits, destroy it utterly!

Already a dozen of the bombs were in place—the frightened note said—hidden in the various cities along the route of the Eq-2. Bombs which lacked only detonators with the directional charge to set them off. And the detonators were on board the Eq-2 on this flight tonight! It was necessary to place them in the bombs at the last moment, since the charge of unstable material in the detonators could not remain potent longer than twenty-five hours. A dozen such detonators, with directional charges, were hidden here now, in charge of this brigand crew, and at each stop a Martian agent would come aboard,

taking one off to his hidden bomb to be set for one hour after this flight was over!

Grim and terrible voyage, this night's momentous flight of the famous Eq-2!

I sat staring at my shaking hands holding the scrawled little note of the terrified Martian renegade, with my heart pounding and the sweat pouring out on me. Had Dianne read the letter? It did not seem possible, for of course she would have taken it to her father, and sent for me—we would never have gone to the Scarlet Festival at all. And the letter was sealed with what obviously was its original seal.

I could envisage now what must have happened . . . the illiterate frightened Martian stopping Dianne, handing her the letter and the ticket . . . perhaps in his awe of her, with only some mumbled words that he was trying to repay her former kindness; and Dianne without looking at them then, had shoved them into her purse and probably forgotten all about it. . . . And I could imagine what had then happened to the poor wretch. Suspecting him, the Martian agents had seen him with Dianne . . . had caught him, doubtless killed him before now. . . . And then had gone after Dianne—and after me. . . . But what would they do with us?

For that moment as I thought of it, terror for Dianne's safety so flooded me that I could think of nothing else. . . . Had she been killed? . . . Where was she?

I jumped to my feet in the dim glow of the empty little cabin. Of what I was going to do I had only the haziest idea. The decision was lifted from me. There was a shadow in the door oval behind me, a little scraping noise and as I whirled, I stood looking into the rounded, ugly black grid-muzzle of a crewman's heat-gun!

CHAPTER III

Brigands of the Airways

"STAND QUIET, Earthman, or you will die." He didn't have to admonish me. With a touch of his poised finger, the stabbing pencil-ray of heat from his gun would in a split second bore through me with its silent white-hot thrust. I stood stiffened, frozen, staring at him.

"Keep your hands out," he said.

I spread my arms. He was a slim but muscular looking fellow, clad in the knitted gray jacket and wide trousers of the crewman uniform, with the peaked cap pulled low over his forehead. A Martian. Not so much obvious in the English of his speech—the Martians are all good linguists; but here in the close range of the cabin light, I could not miss the look of his wide, thin shoulders, his head thrust forward on its thin neck, and the cosmetic flush covering the parched and grayish skin of his face to simulate the swarthiness of a Venusian.

"I have no weapon," I said. "A peaceful passenger here. Why should I need a weapon? What is the meaning of this?"

His thin wide mouth twitched with a faint ironic smile. "Of course you know nothing! Do you think I am a gullible fool?" He came cautiously forward, with leveled weapon and with his left hand skillfully searching me. Did I dare risk his shot by jumping him? I was tense with the thought, but he was too alert, I did not dare try it.

"Very good," he said. "Stand over there. What's your name?"

"Jac Hart. The Triplanetary Union. Now look here—"

He was unimpressed. "Suppose you tell me what you're doing on this flight," he said.

"I told you—a passenger. Tri-

planetary business, certainly not yours. I'm going to Carolah—"

"Stop lying. There was a girl—"

My heart leaped. Had they indeed killed Dianne? I tried to steady myself. "There *is* a girl," I said. "Dianne Donaldson. Look here, what all this means I don't know. I—"

"You lie."

"I was with the girl at the Festival. I—I thought she was taking this voyage—"

"She is," he said suddenly. I had to believe him, with so great a sweep of relief that momentarily I stood weak and shaking.

"She's here?"

"Yes. But she will not talk—or else in truth she knows nothing."

"Nothing of what?"

He did not answer me. His dark gaze had flicked to the chair where I had been sitting. Dianne's purse was there, and the scrawled note lay beside it. Still with his gun warily upon me so that I did not dare move, he glanced at the note. Then he was back facing me.

"Now we can talk more to the purpose," he said grimly. "You read that letter?"

"Yes."

"It was in the girl's purse? Had she read it?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"And so you know what this night will bring." He chuckled grimly. "Well, much good it will do you. The end of you, of all this rotten world—"

"And you also," I retorted. "You and the rest of your murderous brigands—"

His smile broadened. "It might be worth it. But not necessary. When this voyage is finished and we are back in Venta again—there will be an hour before the bombs go off—an hour for us to hurl ourselves away by rocket. Have no fear; we will return to Ferrok-Shahn for the plaudits of the people. A few of us will be left in the different cities here along the route, of course. Noble suicides and they love the idea. But not me."

"What's your name?"

"Marok."

He seemed relieved, his first tenseness leaving him. They had feared, of course, that Dianne or I had been able to warn the Venta officials of the plot. Marok now seemed satisfied that we had not. With the tenseness of this desperate venture upon him—and aided perhaps by the carnival spirit of this Scarlet Festival Night—I could see that he had had rather freely of the Baccus-wine.

He told me now that luck had been with them so far on this voyage. Martian agents were in control of the little private air-runs. This brigand crew were flying the ship. The normal crowd of passengers here on board would have been a problem, yet they could not bar too many of them from embarking, it would have aroused suspicion, perhaps investigation before the voyage was over. But this night of the Festival was the one night of the year when almost no one wanted to travel, which was why they had selected it, of course. A few passengers were on board now, just a small group of them.

"We have them in the upper deck salon under guard," Marok was saying with his ironic grin. "They know nothing, of course, that the end of the world—and themselves—is so soon upon them."

"And now you're going to put me with them?" I said.

He shook his head. "You know too much. Why should we throw them into hysteria and panic? No, I think I will tie you up here."

"The girl, Dianne, she is with them?"

He only grinned at me. Now we could feel the ship's vibration again, and hear the throb of the propellers

and 'copters as we sped along.

"Carolah," Marok said. "We're dropping down, a brief stop, Earthman, fortunately no passengers are booked, on or off. The freight and mail—" He chuckled again. "I think safely we can dispense with those. Of what use, really, with the end of the world so near?"

I SAW NOW that at the cabin doorway threshold he had placed lengths of rope he had brought with him. I knew I had to stall, he still had never relaxed an instant with his weapon. Could I create an opportunity for a desperate try? Would the wine he had drunk perhaps have increasing effect upon him if I waited a little longer?

I tried to smile with what I hoped might intrigue him. "Carolah? They tell me the Scarlet Merrymakers are very bold, here in Carolah. And we land almost within the grove, don't we? Shall we watch while we are here?"

"Why not?" he agreed. He gestured toward the broad window port just behind me. "But don't think me a fool, Earthman. One move and I will drill you; it might be easier than tying you up, anyway."

It is strange, but a fact, that in very truth Venus and the Earth are indeed astronomical twins. Almost of the same size and mass, with axial rotation of almost the same duration. It was still the Midnight Hour as we dropped down upon the small private air-run at Carolah; and the Scarlet Festival here was at the height of its voluptuous climax.

As the Eq-2 settled into its rack for its brief stay, Marok stood with me at the window, the grid of his gun muzzle pressed against my side. The glow of the festival lights shone upon us, a riot of color sheen in the dim little cabin.

The air-run field, in the hands of the bandits, seemed dim and neglected. Out beyond it, the festival grove was brilliant with its shifting rainbow glare. Upon a great dais raised in the center of the lagoon, the White Princess and her White Maidens stood grouped, sleek and dripping from their swim, triumphantly enthroned. But now, at midnight as we watched, the Scarlet Princess and her girls were just emerging from the pool. The battle of the vine-ropes and the flowers was beginning. . . .

Marok's chuckle was appreciative. "You are right. They do it nicely, here in Carolah."

And the Scarlet Princess would win, of course. That was traditional. But my attention was hardly on it. In a moment, here at the dim air-run the cloaked figure of a man came darting. Two of the pirate crewmen met him at the boarding incline, handing him a small, black cylindrical package a foot or so in length. The Martian agent in Carolah, receiving the detonator with its directional charge, ghastly little trigger to be placed now in his hidden bomb here.

I stood watching him as he took it and darted away. Perhaps that messenger still might not be figuring he need be a suicide—he still could get back with local transportation to Venta, and join the escaping rocket ship.

Curiously irrelevant thought. Of what difference to me, to all of Venus? One bomb, at least, would in a few moments now be equipped and ready, securely hidden, inevitably detonating an hour after the end of this voyage. All I could do was stand here helpless, futile, afraid to move because a heat-gun muzzle was pressing my ribs!

NOW THE Eq-2 was swiftly rising again. With the festival dropping away, Marok turned from

the window. He sighed. "Very nice, you were right, Earthman. Too bad we leave. Yet, in an hour we will see it again in Mizrah, won't we?"

Such pleasant sights of gay revelry to stir the primitive senses could never be seen in Ferrok-Shahn. They were too incongruous to the busy mechanical efficiency of Mars. And this was to be the last Festival of the doomed Venus. Perhaps Marok was thinking regretfully of that. He stood behind me, sighing again.

"Look!" I said suddenly. "Why, Marok, how queer—"

It brought him back to the window, intent as I excitedly pointed in a desperate effort to distract him. And as though fate were intervening to help me, at that instant the Eq-2 gave a sharp lurch—perhaps to avoid some private craft dangerously in our path of ascent as its pilot gazed down with his glasses upon the festival. Marok's movement toward the window, and the lurch, momentarily knocked him against me. His grid-muzzle for that second wavered aside.

It was enough. I tensed, shifted, caught his hand holding the gun at its wrist.

"Why—you—you—" He ripped out a Martian oath. As we struggled, the gun fired its split-second charge, missing me so that it hit the white-metal cabin wall with a low sputtering shower of sparks radiating back upon us as we fought. He was a wiry, strong fellow. He tried to turn the gun inward upon me. Then I had wrested it from his hand, but his fist caught my face with a blow that snapped my head back and whirled my senses.

Then I knew that I was falling, still clutching the gun, but dizzily falling, with him sprawled on top of me.

"So, you want to die now, Earthman?"

His blow knocked the gun to the floor beside us. As I squirmed and threshed, I felt the lump of it under me, against my back. He had me by the throat now, strangling with all the power of his steel-like fingers. My ears were roaring; all the dim and turgid cabin scene was fading into bursting showers of silent lights. . . .

"Dianne . . . Dianne. . . ." It was as though I wanted my murmuring lips to carry her name while my senses faded into the last abyss of death. . . . And with it, like the far-away fragment of a dream of someone else, I seemed to know that I had a cold and sweating hand fumbling under me for the gun. Then my fingers had gripped it, drawn it out. Marok gave a cry as he saw the gun; his hands left my throat, but he was too late. With what seemed my last despairing strength, my shaking finger pressed the trigger and the violet hiss spat and burned into his chest, drilling through his heart.

For a time I lay gasping, pinned by the weight of the dead slumped Martian. But in a moment my head cleared; I slid Marok's body off me and staggered to my feet. The cabin door-oval was still open. The fight fortunately must have been unheard, no one was coming in the glowing outer corridor. I shifted the door panel closed. There was a lock; I locked it.

What I could do now seemed clear to me. Certainly it was the only thing I could plan. Marok and I were about of a size. I discarded my outer clothing, stripped the body and arrayed myself in the crewman garb. With the peaked cap pulled low as Marok had worn it, probably I could pass for him if I could keep in the dimness and at long range.

There was a cabin cubby closet here. I shoved the body into it, with my clothes and the ropes which were here on the floor. In a moment I was slouching out into the corridor. Down

at an angle of its further end, one of the brigands was standing. I tried to turn another way, into a cross corridor here, but he had seen me. His hand went up; he called,

"You, Marok. Is it all right? The Chief was coming to attend to it. The Carolah landing kept him busy."

I steadied my voice, with my heart racing. Would my voice pass muster?

"No need," I said. "Tell him that the fool Earthman knows nothing. I have disposed of him."

The fellow at the corridor end chuckled and I moved away, ducking into an ascending catwalk that led up to the dome-deck. Already the Eq-2 was up in the starlight, speeding on its way. Through the glassite dome the starlight filtered down. Up here the little open deck was dim, save for the starlight, and the glow of lights in the window ports of the control room forward, which sat like a little cube wedged into the narrowing deck of the bow. The smaller radio room was behind it, with windows that were dark.

I was moving forward, with Marok's heat-gun in my hand, close beside the racks of escape emergency equipment—'chutes and oxygen helmets, and the apparatus for fire-fighting. I had no warning, only a vague sound that made me see the dim shape of a black-cloaked figure lurking in the shadows of a rack—a figure which all in that same second flung itself upon me!

CHAPTER IV

Girl Prisoner

I MUST recount now what had been happening to Dianne, in substance as she afterward told it to me. I was quite right in my conjectures about her meeting with the Martian renegade. She had hardly recognized him when tonight, just before I had come to take her to the Festival, the fellow had accosted her in the Embassy gardens, ragged, whining, sniveling and reeking of the Baccus-wine which had been his lifelong undoing.

As I had envisaged, she had shoved his gifts into her purse, ignoring his mumble of a flyer ticket. Thinking idly that his mind was wandering with drink as he babbled of terror, and the purloined ticket if it was needed to help, and this thing of great urgency—she had hurried to meet me and had forgotten the incident.

Like mine, Dianne's mind had held no least presage of evil as we gaily stood in the boathouse clothes-recess and she had cast off her cloak, revealing her beauty to me, my admiring gaze flushing her cheeks. She took her purse from the cloak, stuffing its flat oblong under her belt-thong, with the thought that she very well might need her cosmetics.

I turned away. Dianne was brushing off the flower petals with which she had been pelted as we arrived. The little side door-oval of the recess was near her. Suddenly without warning, from the rack of hanging garments at her side, the dark-robed figure of a man appeared. His hand gripped her, his other hand went over her mouth, stifling her outcry.

His voice was hardly more than a whisper, low, menacing. "Quiet! You will not be hurt—"

Now he was shoving her back through the hanging garments. Dianne was able to struggle a little, but there were other hands clutching her now. Then they had her outside, holding her as with her puny strength she tried to fight them.

"Here, Marok, the chloroform! Shut her up, you fool! Do you want to bring all the place on us?"

It was a muttered admonition, partly in English, partly in the language of Ferrok-Shahn, which because her father was Earth's ambassador to

Mars in former years, Dianne knew well.

"Silence her. Here, let me hold her!"

Dianne's purse, as she writhed and twisted in the grip of her captors, was knocked from her belt, lying unheeded on the ground. Then someone held the sponge of chloroform against her nose, its sickening sweet, volatile vapor wafted her senses away.

SHE DID not quite lose consciousness. There was the dim knowledge that she was shrouded in a cloak and hood, being hurried away . . . the feeling of a conveyance, rocking and bumping . . . the whir of 'copters of a small flyer. . . . Then somehow she realized as she was set on her feet and told to walk and mechanically did so, that she was in a dim little airrun . . . then being carried up an incline and into the glowing interior of a great flyer.

Her senses wafted off again. . . . At last, vaguely with the realization that time had passed, Dianne felt herself stirring. She was lying on cushions on the floor of a cabin, dimly tubelit. A faint throb of vibration was distantly, dimly audible and she knew that the aircraft was in flight. At the door of the cabin a crewman—burly fellow in knitted jacket and pantaloon trousers stood lounging on guard.

And there was a man sitting beside her, here on the floor watching her—a slim, swarthy fellow, dapper with his stiff uniform and the peaked, gold cap of a purser.

"So the Sirrata recovers?" he said softly. "Don't be frightened, my dear. I have been waiting for your senses to come. My name is Timko—I am in charge here."

"What—what happened?" Dianne struggled dizzily to sit up, with his solicitous hand steadying her, helping her up.

"The chloroform," he said. "It will pass in a moment more."

In Dianne's confused mind there had been a first thought of relief; she could remember being seized, brought here. Was this her rescuer? But in the same instant she knew it was nothing like that . . . the faint irony in this purser's voice . . . and the burly guard leering down at them, a heat-gun in his hand.

"What do you want?" Dianne demanded. "How dare you—this outrage—"

The fellow Timko dropped his bantering manner. "Where is your purse?" he demanded grimly.

"My purse? Why—why—" Then she stammered the truth. She could remember having it—had she dropped it, there by the boathouse?

"There was a letter in it," Timko said. "A wine-soaked traitor learned something, didn't he? He talked with you. Didn't he hand you a letter—about what he had learned maybe?"

"Handed me a letter? Yes, I remember that." Dianne was puzzled.

"And you told your father? Or that young Earthman?"

"I—I haven't read the letter yet. Why should I? Is it—important?"

He laughed softly; he seemed relieved. And as he questioned her further, with her startled wonderment so obvious, he believed her.

Then at last he stood up. "Stay where you are," he said. "You will not be harmed." He laughed again. "The beautiful daughter of Earth's ambassador—when Venus is gone and if war then should come with the Earth—we will have you in Ferrok-Shahn, handy as a hostage."

To the puzzled Dianne his words were as incomprehensible almost as though he had been talking in the language of distant Pluto's fabled inhabitants. But she could not miss that this was all something of tremendous and terrible import.

"I don't understand you," she said. "The death of—"

"I'm glad that you do not," he grinned. "It would have been very bad—had you told your father." He turned to the guard at the doorway. "She knows nothing, Zelo, we can thank the star-belt for that. No need of putting her with the passengers. I'll leave her here with you. Guard her well."

"Of course. Of course, Tor-Timko. Trust me for that."

THE BURLY guard closed the cabin door as Timko left. Then for a moment he stood gazing at the beauty of his prisoner. He came and sat down on a little stool, drawing it up beside Dianne. His gray Martian face, swarthy with the cosmetic disguise, carried an admiring, ingratiating smile.

"And he leaves me here to guard you, perhaps for all this last great voyage of the Eq-2! What a pleasure for me, Sirrata."

Dianne's heart seemed jumping in her throat, but she managed a smile. "Thanks," she said. "So we're on the Eq-2 are we?"

"Between Venta and Carolah." He gestured toward the window port, with its starlight outside. "At Carolah—why should we not watch the Scarlet Festival together?"

"Why not?" she agreed.

Like almost everyone this night, he had had his Baccus-wine. The smell of it was on him, and its blur was in his voice and flushing his face as his greedy eyes roved over her.

"You were in the Festival at Venta?" he suggested.

"Yes," she said.

"And more beautiful than them all." He shifted toward her, but she slid back a little. "We could be friends, Sirrata. I am not quite what I seem, not just a poor Venus crewman. And you, of all prisoners here, only you will live to remember it."

"How nice," she retorted gaily. "Should we not drink to that, my friend Zelo?"

As she hoped, promptly he produced his flagon of alcoholite. He offered it to her.

"You first," she said. "Perhaps even it might injure me, with the chloroform fumes still in me. I had not thought of that. But you go ahead. I can drink to you in spirit, even if not in the spirits of the brew."

The sodden fellow laughed gustily as he drank. "Ho! Ho, the little lady is clever."

Some of the Baccus brews are very potent. Perhaps this one was, or perhaps already he had imbibed too freely. A clever, beautiful woman can add to anyone's intoxication. Dianne was plying him with the drink and he hardly realized it. Time was passing, she could not guess how much. There was in her mind only the urgency of getting out of here, to escape somehow from the ship when it landed at Carolah.

"I was the White Princess once," Dianne was saying. "Another draught—everyone drinks to a White Princess. It is tradition."

"And to the Scarlet Princess," he laughed. "Two drinks—to the Scarlet Princess—and to you—"

"And to me."

He lurched on the stool. The bottle in his hand was empty. For a moment she sat watching him silently as he swayed, with his eyelids wavering.

"If you would lie down," she said soothingly. "I could awaken you to see the festival at Carolah."

He mumbled agreement, and he stretched himself down, almost in a moment he was stentoriously breathing with the stupor of drunken oblivion.

The black cloak and hood in which Dianne had been brought here lay discarded in a corner of the cabin. She

flung it around her. Zelo's smallish heat-gun lay on the floor beside him. Though she was not quite sure how to fire it, she dropped it into a pocket of the cloak. A thin-bladed dagger was in a sheath at the Martian's belt. She removed the sheath, clipped it to the tasseled golden cord at her waist.

The padded tubelit corridor outside the door momentarily was empty as she cautiously peered. Then she stepped out, pulling the door-slide closed after her.

CHAPTER V

Room of Racked Death

DISGUISED as Marok, I had stuffed the Martian's body into that cabin closet and gone to the dome-deck. The Eq-2 now was well past Carolah, heading for Mizrah. I had little warning when, in the starlight up here, that black-cloaked figure leaped upon me. I did not press the trigger of my heat-gun—all my life I will thank Providence for that! I would have done it in another second, but a low voice was gasping.

"Jac! Jac!—"

It was Dianne! She had escaped from her drunken guard as I have described. We crouched in a shadowed recess of the dome-deck, swiftly whispering, telling each other what had happened. There wasn't much that I had to tell Dianne!

Before the ship had reached Carolah she had been able to hide within hearing of a group of the Martian crew. They were talking in Martian, but she could understand it well. She was aware of the full plot now, and that I was a captive on board. More than anything, she wanted to find me, try and get me loose from my enemy guard.

She had located the room where the detonators were racked—a cage-like division at the stern of the big open space in the lower hull which was the mechanism room. Dianne crouched on an overhead metal catwalk, with the mechanism room spread beneath her, the great jet-engines throbbing with their murmuring hiss.

"I could see the detonators down through the ceiling bars of the cage-room," she was telling me now.

"Small cylinders? At Carolah I saw the Martian agent taking one away."

"So did I!

"Oh, Jac, if only I could have stopped him! I couldn't get near the exit port. Small cylinders, yes. Cylinders in racks—a dozen of them."

Lethal room! The fate of a world was in that cage-room! And one of the diabolic cylinders already had been taken to its bomb!

"Dianne, we might get down there now," I suggested.

"We might. I did get in there myself—just for a moment before we arrived at Carolah!"

There was a small side entrance to the cage, off a lower runway at the very bottom of the hull. Dianne had gotten down there.

"Jac, I was in the cage. I didn't know what to do. I tried to examine them—I had to duck away, a guard was coming. He didn't see me in the dark runway. He took one of the cylinders—"

"The one that was taken off at Carolah!"

"Yes. I couldn't stop him—"

"Dianne, if I could smash those detonators—you can lead me—"

"All right. I—I want to show you —what I tried—I thought—"

Her agitated whispers died. One of the brigand crew was coming this way! Dianne was in deep shadow, but I realized that a little stray glow of starlight was on me.

He saw me. "Who is that?" he demanded sharply.

Perhaps I could have drilled him then, but someone in the control room might see it. I stood erect.

"Marok," I said. "I dropped something here, but I have found it."

"You, Marok, things go nicely for us, don't they? We pass Mizrah soon." He sauntered away, along the deck until his figure disappeared down an incline.

DIANNE was up beside me now; the starlight was a glow on her white terrified face in the shrouding folds of the black hood. We stood a moment, watching our chance, then we moved like shadows along the inner face of the glassite pressure wall.

"Here," Dianne murmured. "I came up through here."

It was a small spiral staircase, leading vertically downward through the three levels into the lower hull. Heat-gun in hand I went first, with Dianne close behind me. There were small windows at the different levels. At the bottom of the stairwell we emerged upon a rather narrow grid-landing.

There was a window here, and a door-oval opposite it, at the threshold of which we stood gazing down upon the glowing eerie lights of the mechanism room. Four or five of the crew were there, moving around the great engines. From here a descending ladder went sharply down; and there was also a bridgelike catwalk at our level, spanning the overhead length of the room.

At my elbow, Dianne was whispering, "At the other end of the catwalk, a ladder goes down. We can get into the cage-room from there. I want to show you what I—"

Suddenly footsteps were sounding directly above us! Someone was coming down the spiral staircase! We scurried across the catwalk with the feeling that every instant one of the crewmen at the engines might look up and see us. Then we were across and down the other ladder, in a narrow corridor with the hull wall on one side and the bars of the cage-room on the other.

It was a feast of Tantalus. There were the rows of racked cylinders so close, with only the bars between me and them. Surely, if I could be in there for only a moment, with some heavy implement that might be lying around there, I could smash them.

Dianne was gesturing. "There's a small entrance at the end of the passage here."

I gripped her. "Dianne, when I go in, you'll hide out here—" The noise of smashing them would bring the Martians upon me, of course. Perhaps, for a shot or two, I could fight, but that would be all. My tensely whispered words were like a farewell. "If—if a fight starts, you run! Go back to that drunken guard. They said they'd take you to Ferrok-Shahn. Don't try to fight them, just to be killed—"

"Oh, Jac—"

I shoved her into a tiny recess where another ladder went upward. She crouched down, trying to murmur a protest.

"Do as I tell you, Dianne."

I had started along the passage when abruptly I realized it was too late! The jet engines had stopped; the propellers and 'copters were whirling. We were landing at Mizrah; and figures were visible now at the end of the passage directly ahead of me! One of them was carrying the cylinder for Mizrah; he went up an incline, but the others stayed, loitering.

I darted back to Dianne, with a new idea. If we could get off the ship without being seen, and escape safely from the Mizrah air-run which I knew was guarded by Martian agents, then I

could report this bandit voyage to the Air-Police; the Eq-2 would be seized at its next stop, or if not, certainly hunted down and destroyed.

THERE was very little time. We went up a ladder, and from a corridor window on the level above, where cabin doors stood in a row, already we could see that the city of Mizrah was close under the dropping ship. The dark air-run was visible; and beside it, the rainbow radiance of the Scarlet Festival, just reaching its excitingly brilliant climax here now at midnight.

Like scurrying, frightened rats we tried to avoid being seen. Several times, at intersecting passages, by seconds we avoided a head-on encounter. I was more desperate than ever now, with the realization that if we did not leave the ship at Mizrah, inevitably we would be seen, trapped, with a fight starting perhaps, which could only end in our deaths.

But we had no chance to get away! The ship was in its rack at the Mizrah air-run in a moment more, and we huddled together by a ventilator hood at the lower level, gazing at the landing door with the packaged cylinder being carried out and the gold-capped Timko and half a dozen of his men loitering around! We were close enough to hear them talking. No passengers, unfortunately, were booked to leave at Mizrah, nor to come aboard. Our stop would be unfortunately brief.

Baffled, Dianne and I could only stand gazing out at one of the window-ports. Outside, the cloaked Martian agent was receiving his cylinder. He was hardly a hundred feet from us. Dianne had taken a tiny photo-snapper to the Venta Festival. She had it in her hand now.

I snapped the one at Carolah," she murmured.

She may have gotten a fair picture of this one with the last despairing possibility that if we could emerge safely from this grim voyage at Venta, during that last hour the police might hunt down some of these agents, and find the hidden bombs before they could detonate.

The agent with his packaged death hurried away in the dimness. The Eq-2 was rising again.

At the window we had a brief glimpse of the Festival climax—a great fountain here in Mizrah, where the Scarlet Princess and her girls—their skin stained crimson with the betel-juice—were running on the fountain rim, with long hair flying like flames and the red glare-lights on them.

"You, Marok? I've been looking for you."

Dianne and I stood frozen in the dimness; one of the Martian crewmen was at a cross corridor only a few feet from us. He came forward. My thoughts were whirling. Did I dare drill him, or were others too near?

He saw Dianne's black-cloaked figure, with a glimpse of her face framed by the hood. "Why, it's the little Sirrata! So you have her with you, Marok?" His tone was amused. "I thought she was with Zelo."

Women are quick-witted. "That clod Zelo is drunk," Dianne said contemptuously. "He is asleep in drunken stupor. With Marok here, I like it much better."

The crewman laughed. "Good. I don't blame you. Bring her along, Marok."

"Bring her?" I echoed.

"To the forward salon. Tor-Timko wants to see you."

In the cross corridor two other Martians hailed us, were coming to join us, starting with us for the salon. Here in the dimness momentarily I could get away with my masquerade.

But now we were trapped!

CHAPTER VI

The Fight on the Dome-Deck

WE PASSED the second level salon where the passengers were under guard.

We mounted to another level, and Dianne had a chance to exchange a few swift whispers with me. That time when she had listened to the crew talking, they had mentioned Marok. He had arrived in Venta on the space-flyer only yesterday from Ferrok-Shahn, sent by the Zar-Tor himself to join Timko in tonight's completion of the plot. So these brigands actually had seen him only briefly.

My only chance was to bluff it through. But at least, I seemed to have a chance. The upper salon was brightly lighted, but empty. One of the crew was passing.

I said, "Where is Timko?"

He gestured overhead. "The control room."

"We'll go there," I said.

The silent dome-deck already was brightened with star gleams; the Eq-2 had leveled off and was speeding forward through the night. Squeezed in the bow, the control room was a glare.

I could see the figure of Timko, just turning from the banks of controls with the ascent finished. He saw me as we approached, waved us into the radio cubby.

The little room was dim, much dimmer than by the controls. Helpful! I drew Marok's peaked cap lower on my forehead. As I flashed a glance at the big radio senders, it occured to me that perhaps I could watch my chance, getting in here alone with them for a moment to send out an alarm call.

Timko joined us. One of the men with us explained Dianne's presence with me.

Timko had turned to me. "You questioned that Earthman well, you did, didn't you, Marok?"

"Yes," I agreed.

"He knew nothing? You are convinced of it?"

I nodded. "Beyond doubt. I have him bound and gagged. Leave him there."

"Or perhaps take him to Ferrok-Shahn?" Timko suggested. "The Zar-Tor mentioned—if we brought back with us anyone of importance—hostages to bargain with if war with the Earth should come."

"He might be useful," I said. "A stupid fellow. Have no fear that he knew anything to tell anyone before he came on board. But he is a Junior Secretary—"

"I see. Of diplomatic importance, you mean?"

"Yes. Like the Sirrata here." I gazed toward Dianne. "We're taking her to Ferrok-Shahn, aren't we?"

The thin, sallow face of Timko under his gold cap bore a leering grin. "For your sake, we'll take her, Marok." Still grinning, he waved us away.

MY ARM was about Dianne as we went back along the dome-deck. "We'll hide," I said. "They'll think it's quite all right, a beautiful hostage and her Martian guard."

We sat huddled in a dark corner back by the stern where the dome was a peak, with the great starry sky beyond it and the luminous jets streaming like tiny tails of a hurtling comet.

As we watched the control room, presently Timko went below. The routine navigator-pilot was at the levers. Two of the other brigands were lounging in there with him. No one was in the dim radio room except the operator, who sat alone now at his instrument to answer properly any routine call, or check signal of the Eq-2 flight. The official calls had to

be answered or at once suspicion would be aroused.

I whispered, "If those two others would leave the control room, with just the pilot there—"

I told her what I had in mind. The pilot had his back to the radio room entrance, and with the humming and hiss of the mechanisms, he might not hear me if I crept in and drilled that radioman.

Dianne was shuddering, but we were so desperate that the death of an adversary had come to mean little. She showed me her sheathed knife.

"This, in his back, might be more silent," she said grimly.

Presently our waiting was rewarded. The two loungers left the control room; disappeared down the bow incline. Our chance had come!

"You wait here, Dianne. I'll try it now."

"No! I'll come with you! If—if the worst comes—I've got a heat-gun."

She was after me as I started forward along the edge of the starry deck. But suddenly we stopped, stricken, so frozen with horror that we could only stand clutching each other. A wild shout sounded from below. Then others, mingled with tramping, running footsteps, the turmoil of a spreading commotion. It seemed to be on the level under us.

"Oh, Jac—"

I could only stare at her mutely as we pressed ourselves back against the glassite wall. The pilot at the levers had locked them and run to the control room doorway. The radioman was on his feet. Both of them were calling startled questions at each other as all in those few seconds the silent interior of the Eq-2 was a chaos of shouts. Then from the narrow, cabin deck almost under us, one of the shouting Martian voices came clear.

"Marok is dead! Murdered by the Earthman! Marok is dead!"

They had found Marok's body there in the cabin closet; Marok's body, with my clothes piled there!

I shoved at Dianne; we ran, tried to duck down behind one of the ventilator hoods. It was too late! The pilot saw us. He shouted:

"Here they are! Still up here at the stern!"

FUGITIVES now, to be hunted down and killed. The radioman was shouting and he fired a heat-stab at us as we ducked—its violet pencil-beam hissed over us, hitting the ventilator hood with a puff of sparks. Now Timko's voice was added to the shouting of the underdeck. At the bow companionway, figures appeared, coming up from below.

"The Earthman and the girl—where are they?"

"At the stern! Careful, he's armed! He's got Marok's gun!"

The voices all seemed forward now. "Dianne, if we can get down into the hull rooms, down by this stern ladder—"

"Oh, Jac—" Dianne's voice was a faint gasp of terror. In my own whirling thoughts there was nothing but the desperate knowledge that we must run, try and hide, or if not, sell our lives as dearly as possible. Another shot from the bow crackled its sparks beside us as we jumped for the hooded top of the ladder. I turned for an instant, fired two stabs at the control room, saw them strike the wall with fountain puffs of light.

"I'll go first, Dianne!"

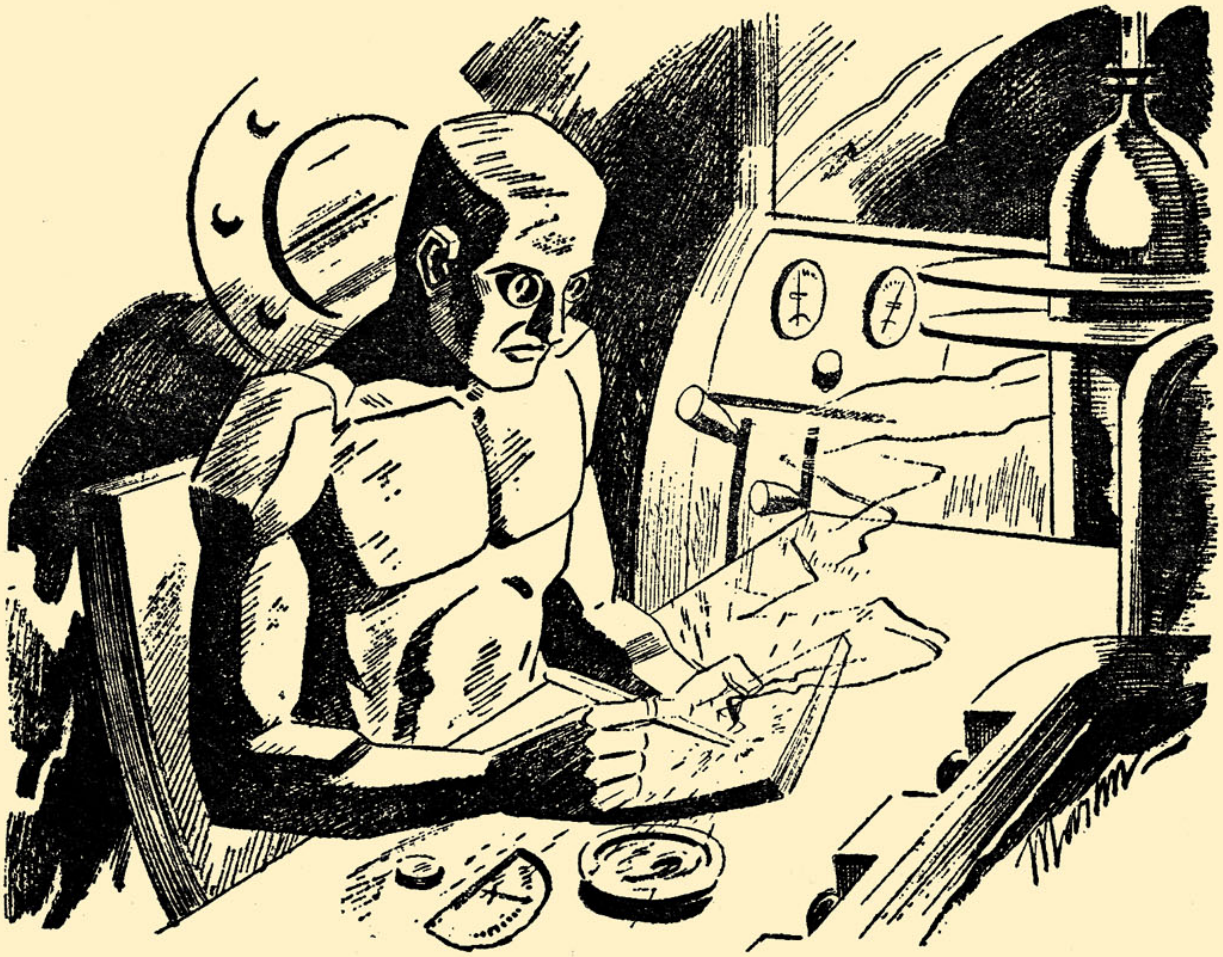
I reached the dark, narrow segment of the deck underneath. The little stern plaza was a dim triangle beside me.

"Jump, Dianne! All clear!"

She jumped the last few steps into my arms, but in that same second a silent, burly figure rose from the gloom and flung itself on us! I had no chance to use my gun. Dianne's

(Continued on page 115)

LETTER FROM THE STARS



It was just a peaceful correspondence between two lonely shut-in strangers — but the destiny of the universe was to depend on the answers!

By A. E. Van Vogt

EAR PEN PAL:

When I first received your letter from the interstellar correspondence club, my impulse was to ignore it. The mood of one who has spent the last seventy planetary periods—years I suppose you would call them—in an Aurigean prison, does not make for a pleasant exchange of letters. However, life is very boring, and so I finally settled myself to the task of writing you.

Your description of Earth sounds exciting. I should like to live there for a while, and I have a suggestion

in this connection, but I won't describe it till I have developed it further.

You will have noticed the material on which this letter is written. It is a highly sensitive metal, very thin, very flexible, and I have inclosed several sheets of it for your use. Tungsten dipped in any strong acid makes an excellent mark on it. It is important to me that you do write on it, as my fingers are too hot—literally—to hold your paper without damaging it.

I'll say no more just now. It is possible you will not care to correspond with a convicted criminal, and therefore I shall leave the next move up to you. Thank you for your letter. Though you did not know its destination, it brought a moment of cheer into my drab life.

Skander, Planet Aurigae II

DEAR Pen Pal: Your prompt reply to my letter made me happy. I am sorry your doctor thought it excited you too much, and sorry, also, if I have described my predicament in such a way as to make you feel badly. I welcome your many questions, and I shall try to answer them all.

You say the international correspondence club has no record of having sent any letters to Aurigae. That, according to them, the temperature on the second planet of the Aurigae sun is more than 500 degrees Fahrenheit. And that life is not known to exist there. Your club is right about the temperature and the letters. We have what your people would call a hot climate, but then we are not a hydro-carbon form of life, and find 500 degrees very pleasant.

I must apologize for deceiving you about the way your first letter was sent to me. I didn't want to frighten you away by telling you too much at once. I could not know that you would want to hear from me.

The truth is that I am a scientist, and, along with the other members of my race, I have known for some centuries that there were other inhabited systems in the galaxy. Since I am allowed to experiment in my spare hours, I amused myself in attempts at communication. I developed several simple systems for breaking in on galactic communication operations, but it was not until I developed a sub-space wave control that I was able to draw your letter (along with several others, which I did not answer) into a cold chamber.

I use the cold chamber as both a sending and receiving center, and since you were kind enough to use the material which I sent you, it was easy for me to locate your second letter among the mass of mail that accumulated at the nearest headquarters of the interstellar correspondence club.

How did I learn your language? After all, it is a simple one, particularly the written language seems easy. I had no difficulty with it. If you are still interested in writing me, I shall be happy to continue the correspondence.

Skander, Aurigae II

DEAR Pen Pal: Your enthusiasm is refreshing. You say that I failed to answer your question about how I expected to visit Earth. I confess I deliberately ignored the question, as my experiment had not yet proceeded far enough. I want you to bear with me a short time longer, and then I will be able to give you the details. You are right in saying that it would be difficult for a being who lives at a temperature of 500 degrees Fahrenheit to mingle freely with the people of Earth. This was never my intention, so please relieve your mind. However, let us drop that subject for the time being.

I appreciate the delicate way in

which you approach the subject of my imprisonment. But it is quite unnecessary. I performed forbidden experiments upon my body in a way that was deemed to be dangerous to the public welfare. For instance, among other things, I once lowered my surface temperature to 150 degrees Fahrenheit, and so shortened the radioactive cycle-time of my surroundings. This caused an unexpected break in the normal person-to-person energy flow in the city where I lived, and so charges were laid against me. I have thirty more years to serve. It would be pleasant to leave my body behind and tour the universe—but, as I said, I'll discuss that later.

I wouldn't say that we're a superior race. We have certain qualities which apparently your people do not have. We live longer, not because of any discoveries we've made about ourselves, but because our bodies are built of a more enduring element—I don't know your name for it, but the atomic weight is 52.9. [A radioactive isotope of chromium—Author's Note.] Our scientific discoveries are of the kind that would normally be made by a race with our kind of physical structure. The fact that we can work with temperatures of as high as—I don't know just how to put that—has been very helpful in the development of the sub-space energies which are extremely hot, and require delicate adjustments. In the later stages these adjustments can be made by machinery, but in the development the work must be done by "hand"—I put that word in quotes, because we have no hands in the same way that you have.

I am enclosing a photographic plate, properly cooled and chemicalized for your climate. I wonder if you would set it up and take a picture of yourself. All you have to do is arrange it properly on the basis of the laws of light—that is, light travels in straight lines, so stand in front of it—and when you are ready *think* "Ready!" The picture will be automatically taken.

Would you do this for me? If you are interested, I will also send you a picture of myself, though I must warn you. My appearance will probably shock you.

Sincerely,
Skander, Aurigae II

DEAR Pen Pal: Just a brief note in answer to your question. It is not necessary to put the plate into a camera. You describe this as a dark box. The plate will take the picture when you think, "Ready!" I assure you it will not be flooded with light.

Skander, Planet Aurigae

DEAR Pen Pal: You say that while you were waiting for the answer to my last letter you showed the photographic plate to one of the doctors at the hospital—I cannot picture what you mean by doctor or hospital, but let that pass—and he took the problem up with government authorities. Problem? I don't understand. I thought we were having a pleasant correspondence, private and personal.

I shall certainly appreciate your sending that picture of yourself.

Skander, Aurigae II

DEAR Pen Pal: I assure you I am not annoyed at your action. It merely puzzled me, and I am sorry the plate has not yet been given back to you. Knowing what governments are, I can imagine that it will not be returned to you for some time, so I am taking the liberty of inclosing another plate.

I cannot imagine why you should have been warned against continuing this correspondence. What do they expect me to do?—eat you up at long distance. I'm sorry but I don't like hydrogen in my diet.

In any event, I would like your pic-

ture as a memento of our friendship, and I will send you mine as soon as I have received yours. You may keep it or throw it away, or give it to your governmental authorities—but at least I will have the knowledge that I've given a fair exchange.

With all best wishes,
Skander, Aurigae II

DEAR Pen Pal: Your last letter was so long in coming that I thought you had decided to break off the correspondence. I was sorry to notice that you failed to inclose the photograph, puzzled by your reference to having had a relapse, and cheered by your statement that you would send it along as soon as you felt better—whatever that means. However, the important thing is that you did write, and I respect the philosophy of your club which asks its members not to write of pessimistic matters. We all have our own problems which we regard as overshadowing the problems of others. Here I am in prison, doomed to spend the next thirty years tucked away from the main stream of life. Even the thought is hard on my restless spirit, though I know I have a long life ahead of me after my release.

In spite of your friendly letter, I won't feel that you have completely re-established contact with me until you send me the photograph.

Skander, Aurigae II

DEAR Pen Pal: The photograph arrived. As you suggest, your appearance startled me. From your description I thought I had mentally reconstructed your body. It just goes to show that words cannot really describe an object which one has never seen.

You'll notice that I've inclosed a photograph of myself, as I promised I would. Chunky metallic-looking chap, am I not, very different, I'll wager, than you expected? The various races with whom we have communicated become wary of us when they discover we are highly radioactive, and that literally we are a radioactive form of life, the only such (that we know of) in the universe. It's been very trying to be so isolated and, as you know, I have occasionally mentioned that I had hopes of escaping not only the deadly imprisonment to which I am being subjected but also the body which cannot escape.

Perhaps you'll be interested in hearing how far this idea has developed. The problem involved is one of exchange of personalities with someone else. Actually, it is not really an exchange in the accepted meaning of the word. It is necessary to get an impress of both individuals, of their minds and of their thoughts as well as their bodies. Since this phase is purely mechanical, it is simply a matter of taking complete photographs and of exchanging them. By complete I mean, of course, every vibration must be registered. The next step is to make sure the two photographs are exchanged, that is, that each party has somewhere near him a complete photograph of the other. (It is already too late, Pen Pal. I have set in motion the sub-space energy interflow between the two plates, so you might as well read on.) As I have said it is not exactly an exchange of personalities. The original personality in each individual is suppressed, literally pushed back out of the consciousness, and the image personality from the "photographic" plate replaces it.

You will take with you a complete memory of your life on Earth, and I will take along memory of my life on Aurigae. Simultaneously, the memory of the receiving body will be blurrily at our disposal. A part of us will always be pushing up, striving to regain consciousness, but always lacking the strength to succeed.

As soon as I grow tired of Earth, I will exchange bodies in the same way with a member of some other race. Thirty years hence, I will be ready to reclaim my body, and you can then have whatever body I last happened to occupy.

This should be a very happy arrangement for us both. You with your short life expectancy will have outlived all your contemporaries and will have had an interesting experience. I admit I expect to have the better of the exchange—but now, enough of explanation. By the time you reach this part of the letter it will be me reading it, not you. But if any part of you is still aware, so long for now, Pen Pal. It's been nice having all those letters from you. I shall write you from time to time to let you know how things are going with my tour.

Ever yours,
Skander, Aurigae II

DEAR Pen Pal: Thanks a lot for forcing the issue. For a long time I hesitated about letting you play such a trick on yourself. You see, the government scientists analyzed the nature of that first photographic plate you sent me, and so the final decision was really up to me. I decided that anyone as eager as you were to put one over should be allowed to succeed.

Now I know I didn't have to feel sorry for you. Your plan to conquer Earth wouldn't have gotten anywhere, but the fact that you had the idea ends the need for sympathy.

By this time you will have realized for yourself that a man who has been paralyzed since birth, and is subject to heart attacks, cannot expect a long life span. I am happy to tell you that your once lonely pen pal is enjoying himself, and I am happy to sign myself with a name to which I expect to become accustomed.

Skander, Aurigae II

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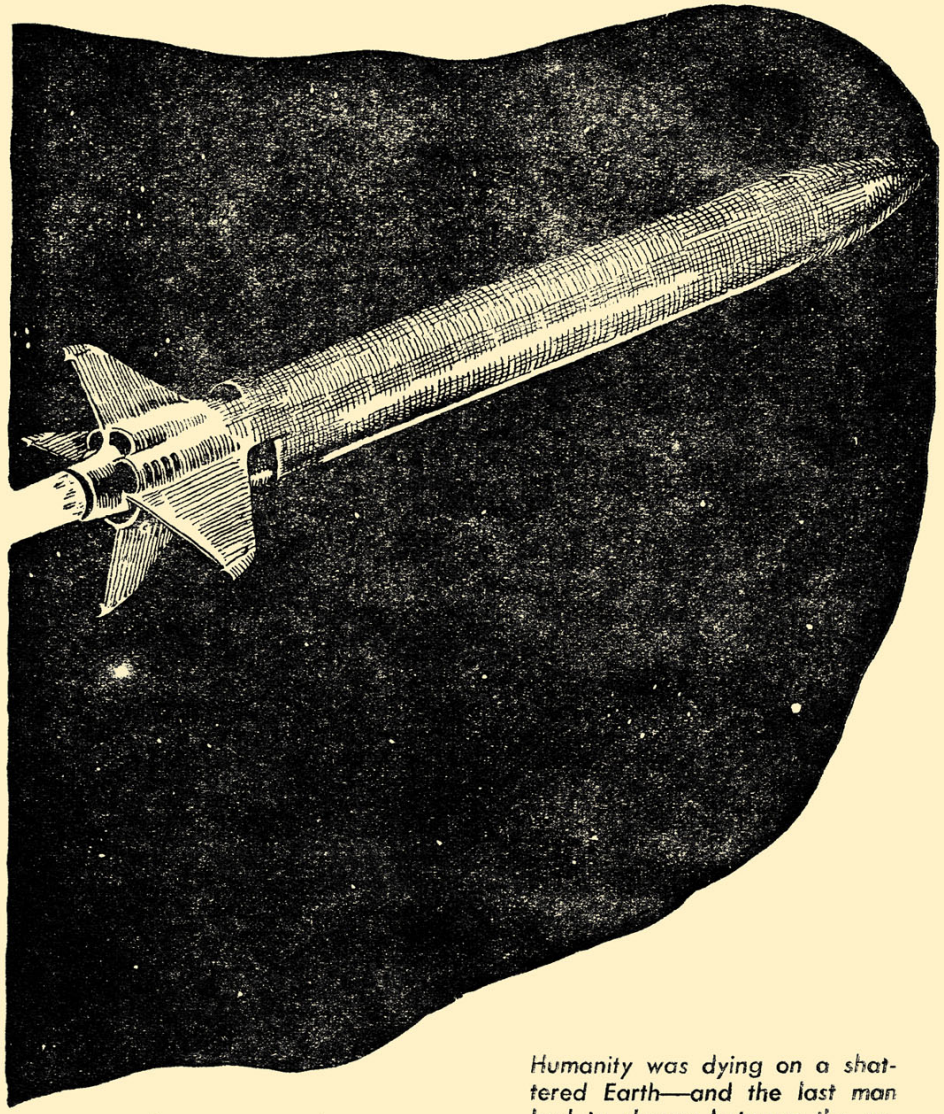
OMEGA and the WOLF-GIRL

By Lester del Rey



Humanity was dying on a shattered Earth—and the last man had to choose between the unknown perils of a slave-life on Mars and throwing himself upon the questionable mercy of the encircling beast-men.

THERE was no space in the tiny cabin for nervous pacing. A scant eight feet separated the hallway entrance from the small porthole that showed the dull black of space; and across, the distance from the locked door on one side wall to that on the other could have been spanned by the young man's arms. Only his eyes were free to roam the narrow room, and they were tired with endless repetition.

For a moment, his gaze rested idly on the porthole, and he stared out-

ward through the cold and the darkness to the tiny point of light that was Earth; but there was no conscious recognition of what he saw. His eyes dropped back to the shelf that held his manuscript, his ink, and the purple, untouched candle. And it was only as he picked up the lump of wax with slow, reluctant fingers that he thought of the valley in the hell world that had produced it. . . .

THE MAN'S shoulders were bowed under the grim weight on his back, and the alpine stock trembled in his grasp. But he fought upwards over the last remaining feet until he was at the top of the pass, and the wastelands were behind. Even then, he could not trust the weight of his burden to his shaking hands, but sank carefully to a sitting posture until it touched the ground, and he could ease his arms out from the straps. Finding a reasonably portable generator to replace the one they could patch no more had been a miracle, and he had no faith in a second one.

For a time he lay quietly, breathing in ragged gasps and staring into the valley that was cut off completely from the world by the surrounding mountains, except for this one narrow pass. Dirty snow straggled down to blend with leprous, distorted scrub trees and run down to flat land. And there, a few log and stone buildings stuck up uncertainly among crumbling ruins, to mark the last failing outpost of the human race, three centuries after the Cataclysm. The man grimaced, and began to pull himself to his feet.

Then an answering clatter of stones sounded from around a rock, and Gram was beside him, pulling him upright and massaging his still trembling shoulders with gentle hands. Her seamed old face broke into a brief flicker of perfect teeth, and her fingers were unsteady, but there was no emotionalism in her voice. "I saw your smoke signal last night, so I've been waiting. I guess I must have been catching a catnap, though. You've been gone a long time, Omega. Okay?"

"Okay, Gram. The generator's in there, and enough fluorobulbs to light all the huts. But I'm glad I didn't have to stretch rations another day. I had to work my way clear to old Fairbanks to find it. That wasn't pretty! They knew it was coming hours before the stuff hit them!"

"Umm. Here! I figured you'd be hungry. As for the bulbs—" She shrugged and pointed to the purplish plants that grew all around, a mutation as deadly as the hard radiations that had produced them. "I'll stick to sprayberry-wax candles. They have other uses; at least Peter thought so."

So gentle, patient old Peter was dead, and there was only an even dozen of them now! But Omega was too tired to care much about anything except the food Gram held out. She watched him wolf it down, and her face lighted faintly as she dropped beside him.

"Eleven worn-out old people and you, now. The last dozen poor supermen," she said with a nod toward the valley; and her voice was filled with the same grim humor that had made her christen him Omega when his mother committed suicide over the rock-mangled body of his father.

But Omega knew it was more than humor. In a normal world, with a decent background and half a chance, they might almost have passed for supermen; except that no such world could have produced them! That had required an Earth left wrecked by the Cataclysm from a cold and casually unjust universe—a world where hard radiations made every birth a mutation and where every undesirable change was savagely purged from the race.

IN A WAY, it was ironic that men had barely avoided wrecking the planet themselves with plutonium, the lithium chain reaction, or the final discovery of a modified solar-phoenix bomb. But somehow they had eliminated that danger at last, and found their triumph useless.

It had been a simple communique from the new Lunar Observatory, at first; they had spotted a meteor having a paradoxically weak but impossibly hot level of radiation that indicated contra-terrene, or "inside-out" matter. The second announcement spoke guardedly of the danger of grazing contact. And fifteen minutes later, the moon ripped apart as electrons cancelled out positrons into energy, and left a great flood of unattached and destructive neutrons.

Surprisingly, there were survivors of the rain of hell-fragments that fell to the earth. Near the poles, a few deep and narrow valleys were only grazed slightly, and where three contained mines or caverns to offer some protection against the radioactive dust that fell everywhere, a measure of life went on after a fashion, and a thousand or so survived. Now three centuries had whittled down the number, and wild mutations and a ruthless survival of the fit had compressed a thousand generations of evolution into one.

There was Gram, who might have saved the race, if her cell structure had appeared in time. Like the wolves and the rabbits that had inherited the earth, her cells had finally found the mutation of totipotency that defied all but the most intense concentration of radiation to burn them or cause further mutations. When a wild new plague had wiped out her people in another valley, she had taken the boy who was to become Omega's father, a rifle, and a sled, and set out through a roaring blizzard to cross four hundred miles of hell to this place. Now, sixty years later, she could still outwork any man in the valley, except for Omega's maternal uncle, Adam, on the rare occasions when he exerted himself.

For Adam had specialized in pure laziness and purer logic that seemed to leap from isolated hints of facts to full-blown knowledge without effort. He had slouched in when Omega was fumbling over calculus, and his eyes had lighted with sudden interest in the books he had never troubled to read. Hours later, he had been explaining and making clear the complex mathematics which his mind had carried beyond the wildest dreams of the pre-chaos scientists.

But it required more than such wild talents to separate a group of freaks from supermen; it took background, opportunity, racial culture, and a future. And in those things, the wolves were their superiors.

SUDDEN light flashed up from the valley, disappeared, and returned to hover beside them. Then the spot wobbled erratically across the pass and came to rest against a flat, shaded rock, danced crazily, and steadied down to business. Below, the thin, lanky hands of old Eli must have been using the big mirror on a long board to give the microscopic leverage that was all he needed. His talent lay in a coordination and control of nerves and muscles so nearly perfect that he could shape and handle the infinitesimal tools needed to manipulate individual microorganisms within the field of a microscope. Now the spot of light fluttered, but its motions were clear enough to spell out letters.

"Hurry, need generator," Gram read, and chuckled. "Sure you found one, eh? Let them—uh!—*Wolf—girl—located!*"

A gamut of expressions washed over her face, giving place to sudden

determination. "Come on, Omega! You can rest later. Here, let me help you with that pack!"

"Why the hurry, and what's all this wolf-girl stuff about?" After the short rest, the pack weighed a ton, and the pass looked ten miles long. No wolf was that important, whatever it had done.

Gram slowed up a little. "Something we never meant to bother you with—Ellen's baby—your cousin. Grown up now, must be. We saw her with a wolf pack once before when you were away, but thought she'd died later. Oh, come on, before they start a search without shields. I'll tell you some other time."

"They won't start without shields," he assured her. "She was living with wolves, Gram?"

"Must have been. And they'd start, all right. Tom and Ed died out there last time before you invented shields! When it comes to race preservation, they'd all rather burn than see you go unmated! *Will* you hurry?"

He hurried; nobody disobeyed Gram. But there was a picture of what a wolf-girl would be in his mind, and the idea of such a mating sat heavier on him than the pack. And he'd thought the old fires of racial preservation were dead!

Adam met them, took the pack, kicked aside one of the shaggy, huge-eared pigs, and paced beside Gram without a trace of laziness. Its squeals gave the boy time to get over the shock of that before his uncle answered Gram's questions.

"Jenkins—off by himself as usual—went to sleep at the far end. Early morning a howling woke him, and there she was with a couple of wolves. He got a good look—human all right, stick in her hand. Time he got there, she was gone, but he saw the direction; reckon I know where she lairs. Came in half an hour ago, fagged out. Soon as he told us, we signaled."

"Umm. Wonder where she's been since we saw her the other time, Adam?"

"Off somewhere. Studied wolves when I was a kid—they wander all over. And with your blood, so could she. Lucky she's back." They reached the powerhouse, and Adam shut up, while Eli began bolting down the generator on a rough base and connecting it to the old water wheel. There was a glow on his face that was new to Omega, and it was reflected by the faces of the rest of the group.

THEY were all there, except for Jenkins, whose green pigmentation and chromosomes that came in triplets instead of pairs represented the only remaining physical abnormality. With that had gone a whole host of wild extrasensory talents that made him fully aware of the unpopularity they won him. Of the others, Eli, Adam, and Simon were already harnessed into the shields. A product of Adam's mathematics, Eli's amazing workmanship, and some of Omega's ideas, they made space a non-conductor of all radiation beyond a certain energy level. They also distorted gravity slightly for some reason, but it was the only way the others could travel in the outlands.

Simon snapped the last battery in place as it finished flash-charging, while Gram made a hasty inspection. "Omega's worn out, and I don't want her to remember me as the one who caught her, if I'm to handle her, so it's up to you. Think you can do it, Adam?"

"I figured some on it. We'll get her."

"Good." She watched them start, and turned back to her hut. "Let the others gaup, Omega, but we're eating, and then you're going to bed . . . after I tell you about Ellen and the girl."

It wasn't much of a story. Besides Omega's father, Gram's hitherto unmentioned baby daughter had survived the plague and the trip. She'd grown up, married Simon after Omega was born, and there'd been a baby coming. Jenkins, who would know, had said that he could tell it was to be a girl.

But some accident on the hellish march had twisted Ellen's mind, and she grew up as an insanely religious fanatic. Apparently the thought of her baby marrying a cousin had been a heinous sin in her eyes. Anyway, they found a wild note, but they had never been able to trace her despite their searches.

"God knows, we tried." Gram's soup was untouched before her. "You never spent years praying for just one girl-child—one fertile girl in a world dying of sterility, Omega! Just one, because the hard rays couldn't trap your kind from the world anymore. My line's fertile, and the baby would have been. . . . You're too young to understand, but the old *need* babies; when you're close to death, you need proof that you're physically immortal through the race—not just soul-stuff. Oblivion's close and taut around you when there's nobody left to remember. . . . Oh, go to bed before I start blubbering!"

"Can they catch her alive?" he asked as Gram began drawing the pig's-wool blankets up over him.

"They'll do it, somehow; we made an agreement to that. Either they come back with her alive, or they rot out there!"

She closed the door quietly behind her, and Omega was alone to wonder at the savage drive that had lain dormant and unknown so long around him. But no thoughts could keep a man awake after the grueling trek he'd just finished, and somewhere in the middle of the thought, he blanked out.

THE SEARCHERS were already in sight when Gram awakened him, two of them staggering under the twisting gravity inside the shields; but Adam apparently was able to predict the shifting force, and the leading figure was steady and resolute. Between the others, there was a covered figure on a long pole, and the tiny clan was gathered outside the hut in a shouting group. But by the time Omega had doused his head in water and joined them, they were silent again. The three were closer now, and their faces and the pose of their bodies could be seen, even in the gathering twilight.

They dropped their burden in the same rigid silence, and Simon, who had been Ellen's mate and father to the child, turned, motioned to his twin sister, and went off toward their hut. The others waited uncertainly, until Adam bent down to pull the blanket from the figure on the ground.

"Wrong word accented on wolf-girl, Gram, but here she is. Now what?" And he yanked the cover from the forlorn creature that lay bound by its feet to the pole.

It was a wolf; strange and odd of form though she was, there could be no shadow of doubt as to her lupine origin. The teeth that gleamed through the ropes around her jaws were wolf fangs, and the tail settled any further question.

Yet it was easy to see how Jenkins could have thought her a woman in the dim starlight, for the mutation that had somehow produced her in spite of her parental totipotency had shaped her into a mockery of human form, and she was as anthropoid as wolfish. Her rear legs were long, and her short front ones ended in lengthened toes to caricature human hands. Her forehead bulged, and her jaw was foreshortened, while the mane on her neck might have been mistaken for a head of hair if she stood upright.

And because she was built in a woman's shape, there was something pitiful about her as she lay glaring up at them.

Jenkins felt it first, and his sigh broke their silence; he pushed forward, his shy, fearful eyes half-filled with tears. For a second, he hesitated, before his hands ripped aside the cords that bound her mouth. Her lips drew back, but she made no move to snap at him as he faced the others, his quavering, timid voice filled with bitterness and apology.

"The ropes cut her lips, Gram. Her mind's all dark and swirling fog, hard to see, but she's crying. Not for herself, but for her babies back there, little ones like her. Do we have to kill her, Gram?"

Gram shook her head to clear it, and her voice was as low as his, and as uncertain. "But you saw the wolf-girl carrying a stick. Can we be sure . . . ? Look further into her mind."

"We found the stick," Adam answered for him. "She'd need one, with her build. Couldn't run on all fours, not quite ready to go upright very long. Jenkins, what's her name?"

"Her name? I—I can't see very well. Something about hunger—pain, I think."

"*Bad-Luck*. Called that because of the way she's built, I guess. Not much of a language, unless they changed it since I was a kid. Better'n your telepathy, though. You read off what I think, while I try her."

HIS LIPS contorted out of shape, and a queer, wailing whine slid eerily out. The wolf-girl's head jerked around, and her eyes shot behind him, to come back reluctantly to his as he called again. At the third try, her own lips parted in an effort, closed, and opened in sounds between a growl and a whine, yet somehow articulated and hopeless. Perhaps the sight of a man and a wolf-mutation talking was as logical an ending for the day as any other; at least, the little audience watched in unchanging dull listlessness.

Jenkins' voice droned forth, reading the meaning from Adam's mind. "Surprised at him . . . not mad at us, why should she be . . . hunting's natural. . . . Is he man or wolf? . . . Yes, she'll answer his questions. No, never saw any human shes outside the valley . . . no baby shes. . . . When are we going to eat her?"

"Ugh! I suppose. . . . Oh, let her go! I wish I'd never known she could talk, Adam, but now—" Gram sighed, staring about for suggestions and finding none. "Tell her we'll feed her, since we ruined her hunting, and let her go; but she's to keep out of our valley and let our stock alone. I guess that's all we can do now. Can you tell her that in her language?"

"Say it all right—they've improved it some; but for her to understand's another thing. Translate the Bible to wolfish, if I had to, but it wouldn't mean much to her. Takes semantic training to work out much with a hundred odd words, though it can be done. Umm!" He frowned, considering, and little Jenkins, again conscious that his gifts were unwelcome among normal minds, slipped away quietly before Adam began.

It took longer this time, and there could be no doubting the surprise and slow dawn of hope on the creature's face as the meaning finally sank in. She lay quietly, her eyes riveted on his as he untied her; but it wasn't until he placed a frozen leg of pork in her oddly human hands that she believed him. Then she was gone at a jerking run.

But she stopped, hesitantly, as a high wail broke from him, and paused long enough to answer his cries, before her figure faded away into the twilight. He grinned crookedly at Gram, and shrugged. "No smell of

people outside that she knows of."

"No." Gram sighed again, and pushed the door open. "Come on inside, Adam, Omega. The rest of you go back to your huts. There's no good to be had from freezing out here. We had our fun, but it's over now, and we can forget the wolf-girl idea."

In that, she was wrong. It was less than three hours later when a subdued howl from outside drew Adam up from the table and out into the night. Outlined in the dim light of the open door, Bad-Luck had returned, and beside her hovered an old and grizzled wolf, with raised hackles and bared fangs, but motionless as the feared man-beast approached.

Their conversation was erratic and uncertain, with long silences, but eventually Adam nodded, and the wolves melted into the darkness. He came back to the hut with a shake of his head and a strange smile, and dropped onto the stool to watch Gram's hands go on remorselessly with her Canfield.

"The old wolf is their Far-Food-Sniffer; keeps in touch with all other packs, I gather. Anyhow, no wolf on the whole planet knows the smell of men, except here. . . . Funny! Nature seems to be cooking up replacements for us, and not wasting time. Came a long way since I studied them. Ethics!"

Gram nodded wearily, and dead, dull silence settled over the hut, relieved only by the monotonous slap of the cards.

IT WAS barely past noon when Simon and his sister were found the next day, deep in the catalepsy of sprayberry poison. Within them, the incredibly slowed labor of breath and heartbeat would go on for hours longer, but it was too faint to be detected, and their bodies were already cool to the touch. Yet they could still be revived, and Omega turned automatically to get the neutralizing dye. Adam's hand stopped him.

"No use, boy. There's always more poison." He looked around the room once more, taking in the magnificent paintings the twins had done, then pulled the door shut behind them and began nailing boards over it. Wooden steps carried them back to the cold-frames where Gram and Eli were at work setting cabbage seedlings. But the hammering had carried the news before them, and no comments were made.

The only sound was a distant drone, like an early swarm of bees, and it disappeared as Omega dropped to the cold earth, and began replanting. How many, he wondered, would live to eat the plants when they were grown? There were only ten now!

Then the buzzing was back, and Gram was dragging the others up to face the sky, where a roaring something grew out of emptiness, flashed over, and faded away again. "A ship! A jet plane!"

It couldn't have been, and yet it was. There was no habitable land below 60° South Latitude; one colony of the original three had reported itself dying of famine; Gram's had perished in the plague; and the wolves knew of no smell of men outside the valley!

But they were already at the powerhouse, and Eli's hands flipped over the switches of the crude spark-gap transmitter the first survivors had built, and the current danced between the electrodes in code so rapid it was like a steady crackle. He waited futilely for an answer from the humming speaker, and began transmitting again.

Then the roar was back, and they had only time to look out before a flash of metal screamed down, wriggled, zipped up across the pass, and was gone again. Gram lifted her fist. "The dirty spalpeens! Making fun—"

Before she could complete the gesture, a young masculine voice burbled out of the speaker. "Hi, people! Took a little time to find and match your frequency—your signal sprays all over the kilocycles. I can't understand that greased lightning c. w., though, so give me three slow dots if you can receive modulated stuff. . . . Fine! Sorry I couldn't land with my fuel reserves, but I'll be back. Meantime, take a look at the film I dropped. Planet Mars, signing off!"

Mars! They'd been almost ready for that, but. . . . And the voice had been filled with a strange quality that instinct recognized as youthful enthusiasms and sure self-confidence. It must be nice—

Jenkins interrupted their reverie by laying a package on the bench. That would be the film, though he alone had seen it fall. For the first time any of them could remember, Eli's hands fumbled as he ripped at the junk wound hastily around the thing, and it was Adam who finally freed the little machine and found the light switch. He focused it carefully against the gray stone wall, located another button, and sat back to watch the moving scenes.

They were obviously conventionalized drawings, at first, but they were clear enough. A man labelled *Mason* stood in the port of a crude rocket ship with his young wife, while a crowd cheered and drew back. They waved, shut the port, and lifted on a jet of flames.

The Earth shrank behind, while the moon slid into view and went quickly past. But Mason was framed in a porthole, just as the moon broke loose in lancing hell-fire. Scenes showed his wife trying to nurse his burned body and frantically fighting to bring the ship down on Mars in a crumpled landing. And then, furry, four-armed anthropoid things came out to take Mason and his wife down to a strange underground and primitive world.

After that, Mason was their teacher. They had been dying for lack of power, but now the ships' atomotors gave them the margin they needed to rush upwards to a self-sustaining civilization that could even bake air and water out of the dead crust of the planet.

Mason grew older, and six girls were born to him. But careful schematics showed that the moon-blast had rendered his male sperm cells sterile, and there were no boys. They stored his superfrozen spermatozoa and sought valiantly for a cure, but they had not succeeded when the screen portrayed his funeral procession.

The final scene showed a glorified statue of Mason, holding a book in one hand and stretching a symbolic atom upwards with the other. Below, eight young and human women were grouped about a great rocket, with their faces turned to the sky and their arms lifted in mute appeal. Then the film ended.

OMEGA wasted no time on the others' comments. The boards on Simon's door came ripping off under his straining muscles, and he was inside and forcing black liquid down the throats of the twins. The vegetable dye they used to color their clothes and serve as their writing ink had revived poisoned pigs before and should serve equally well for men. It did. The late afternoon sun saw twelve of them again, watching as the ship settled downward on its jets a hundred yards away.

A thin, four-armed, furry figure came out, to be followed by two apparently identical others. And then, while the dozen waited in tense expectancy, the door closed firmly and they headed toward the group—three Martians and no Earthmen! Beside him, Omega heard Gram's breath

whistle out heavily, and an animal snarl from Jenkins. Only Adam seem unruffled and unsurprised as he sauntered forward to grasp their leader's hand and make proper introductions.

Jaluir's furry face remained expressionless, but his voice was the warmly enthusiastic one that had come over the speaker. "So you really do exist? Where the deuce were you last winter? There wasn't a sign of life that we could see."

"Holed up. Snow gets twenty feet deep down here—covers everything. We seal up and hibernate in the caverns back there till after the spring floods. Explore all non-radioactive areas?"

"All seventeen. This one came last, and our plane broke down for a month, or we'd probably have found you." He shrugged, a gesture that must have come down from Mason. "After that, we gave up hope until I made a forced landing in old Fairbanks. I was pretty sure someone had been there recently, and Commander Hroth let us stay over another week. But it was a devil of a job locating your campfire sites to get a fix."

"Why bother? You didn't come just to see us—not with people of our kind on Mars!" Gram's voice was suddenly old, tired, and suspicious, and the Martian blinked in surprise.

"We needed some metals, of course—but we wouldn't have crossed space yet for just that." He hesitated, and his next words were fumbling and uncertain. "The girls who saw us off—we failed, in spite of them—they are the last. We had only the Prophet's male germs. . . . We have taboos, too, ma'am, but—well, we had to do what we could. Now, when our hopes were gone, the gods have given us life again!"

"Umm. Well, you might mean it. You and your friends had better come inside. No use standing out here."

"If it's all the same, I'd rather see that radio transmitter of yours," he answered.

GRAM nodded grudging approval, and Omega was glad of the excuse to rescue him from their frozen faces. It didn't make sense. When even a Martian crossed forty million miles to pay a neighborly visit, he deserved a little warmth in his reception. Instead, Gram was adopting the same attitude with which she'd greeted Adam's proposal to scrap English and switch to a fully semantic language of his devising. The boy fell into step with the alien, while the others followed.

The transmitter held Jaluir's attention for only a minute before his eyes began traveling over the rest of the powerhouse. The crude Millikan microscope Adam had designed from the fruits of Omega's wanderings was inspected more thoroughly, to be followed by one of the little radiation shields.

"Cuts off high energy radiation," Adam volunteered, and his eyes were speculative, in spite of his easy grin. "Take it along if you can use it."

The Martian nodded and dropped it into a pouch on his belt—his only article of clothing. "Simple after someone else discovers the principle. Thanks! We certainly can use it. . . . We wondered how you reached Fairbanks!"

Gram grunted. "Nonsense! Omega and I don't need contraptions; we're naturally immune to radiations!"

"Zot luill! You're—!" The face that he turned to the boy now was no longer expressionless. It held a burning excitement that no alienness could conceal. He twisted on his heel and snapped out syllables in a strange tongue that sent the other two Martians toward their ship in a clumsy run. But when he faced them again, his emotions were under control, and

his voice was quite even and friendly.

"Sorry, but I've got to go back to the ship for a few minutes. Look, let's get down to brass tacks, shall we? How soon can you leave?"

"For Mars?" Gram asked.

"For Mars. It'll be five hundred years before Earth is really habitable again, at least! And you can't go on in these little valleys. What better sanctuary than a grateful Mars? Of course, you'll need a little time—but talk it over until I get back."

And he was gone after his companions.

GRAM sighed wearily, and the stiffness drained out of her body. "Sanctuary—or slave pen? He seemed nice enough, but—"

"He's a monster!" Jenkins' normal meek whisper was distorted into a savage, hate-filled wheeze. "An inhuman monster! His brain is blank—all blank. I can't even feel it."

Adam's cool voice cut into his ravings. "Take it easy! If you can't snoop in his mind, you don't know what he is. And you don't hate a man for that—or do you? Personally, I liked Jaluir."

"So did I," Gram admitted, but there was no lifting of the frown on her face. "We would! You can't catch a wolf without something attractive for bait. And maybe he is all sweetness and light. The missionaries meant to help the Aztecs, until they found gold and Cortes came. And our ancestors made slaves of the black people, and tried to exterminate the Jews for not being exactly like themselves—and Mars is a lot stranger to us than anything we found here. Maybe we're gods to them, as he says; and maybe we're animals."

Their doubts were growing by a process of mutual induction, until even Omega's ideas began to veer toward them. But his words carried no conviction in either direction. "Of course, we can't be sure; we have only the evidence they designed for us. But he seemed friendly."

"Why shouldn't he, when our planet's loaded with minerals they need? We're used to gravity that makes them uncomfortable, and we can stand the radiations, now. He liked that part a little too much!"

Gram hesitated, and her gaze turned to the east where her native valley lay. "We always took even better care of our animals than ourselves. I know, because we had horses when I was a girl—until a careless fool left a gate open and our two stallions were killed by wolves. He tried to hide the evidence, because he knew what we'd do to him. But I saw it all, and I was young enough to carry tales. Poor devil! They turned him out to the wolves, eventually. . . . Men will do strange things for beasts of burden, Omega."

"Or for pets," Adam added thoughtfully. "Vote?"

But no vocal poll was needed. Simon and his sister moved toward the door, and his sad, dulled eyes were quietly reproving as he looked at Omega. Gram turned from one to another, and at last she nodded quietly and went out toward the huts. In a moment, only Adam and Omega were left in the building.

Jaluir found them there, and the lilting jingle on his lips broke off in a sudden puzzled g r u n t. Adam chuckled wryly. "Gone! Took a vote, after a fashion. It's a lousy world, Jaluir, but we're staying. And don't ask why, because I don't know."

"But you can't—you're. . . . *All* of you? Omega too?"

"That's up to him; he didn't vote. Rest of us stay, anyhow."

"Oh." Jaluir c o n s i d e r e d it, shrugged, and gave it up as a hopeless riddle. "I won't pretend I can understand, but if that's the way you really want, it, I'll explain it to Com-

mander Hroth somehow. Anyway, I've got to return to the main ship before it gets dark, so I'd better shove off now. But I'll be back in the morning to pick you up, Omega."

He grasped the hand Adam held out and was gone, to take off a minute later in a flaming roar and go speeding over the mountains. Adam slumped against the door for a few seconds, then came in and began quietly buckling on a radiation shield.

"Going up to talk with the wolf-girl," he volunteered with deliberate casualness as he finished. "Curiosity. If I don't get back in time to see you off—"

"Who made up my mind I was going—Jaluir or you?"

"Fate! If they're nice people, you should; if not—well, they'll have weapons and ways. Good luck, son!" He slapped his nephew's back lightly, grinned, and went sauntering off, leaving Omega alone with his thoughts. They were not good company.

But Adam's logic was unanswerable, and Omega's packing was done in the morning when he awoke from fitful slumber to see the plane already landed and waiting beside the row of silent, boarded-up huts. He had helped Gram nail them shut during the night, and he knew that only Gram and he were left, besides Adam, still among the wolves. Even little Jenkins and his queer twisted talents! Gram's eyes, red with lack of sleep, followed his gaze.

"Forget them, boy. Jenkins was always a little crazy, and Eli was dying of cancer, anyhow. The rest were—useless! Sometimes I used to wonder about such things—the warped, strange ideas of isolated little communities, and the references in the psychology books to contagious suicide during times of trouble. But there's something more."

She shook her head wearily, drawing her hand across her forehead. "It's a curse, a will to death that made them sterile because they wanted to be, and made them die whenever they had an excuse—no matter how much they refused to believe it. Call it a mutation that crept in unnoticed, or say the whole race gave up and went quietly insane after the hell years. They could have built some kind of glider-plane and kept contact between the valleys, if they'd had the spunk, and none of this would have happened. Anyway, there's a curse on the valleys. . . . You'd better go now, Omega. Don't keep Jaluir waiting too long."

There were words inside him, but they wouldn't come out. Gram laid her brown old hand gently on his mouth, and the ghost of a smile appeared on her lips. "No, just go. And sometime, if you have children—not slave children, Omega, but men—tell them of me. I'd like that!"

The door was closed when he looked back, and the valley was strange and oppressive. Jaluir motioned him to a seat beside a window away from the huts, and he sat staring at the instrument board for what seemed hours while the plane waited. Then the jets screamed out, and they were airborne after a brief run.

"Below," the Martian said softly, and pointed.

TINY but distinct against a patch of snow, a figure stood waving up at them surrounded by dark dots that must have been the wolves. Jaluir dropped the plane and circled as close as he could, and for a moment Adam's easy smile was visible. Then he turned and slipped into a cave with the pack, and there was only the Martian's silent grip on the boy's shoulder and the sound of the jets as they sped off across the wastelands.

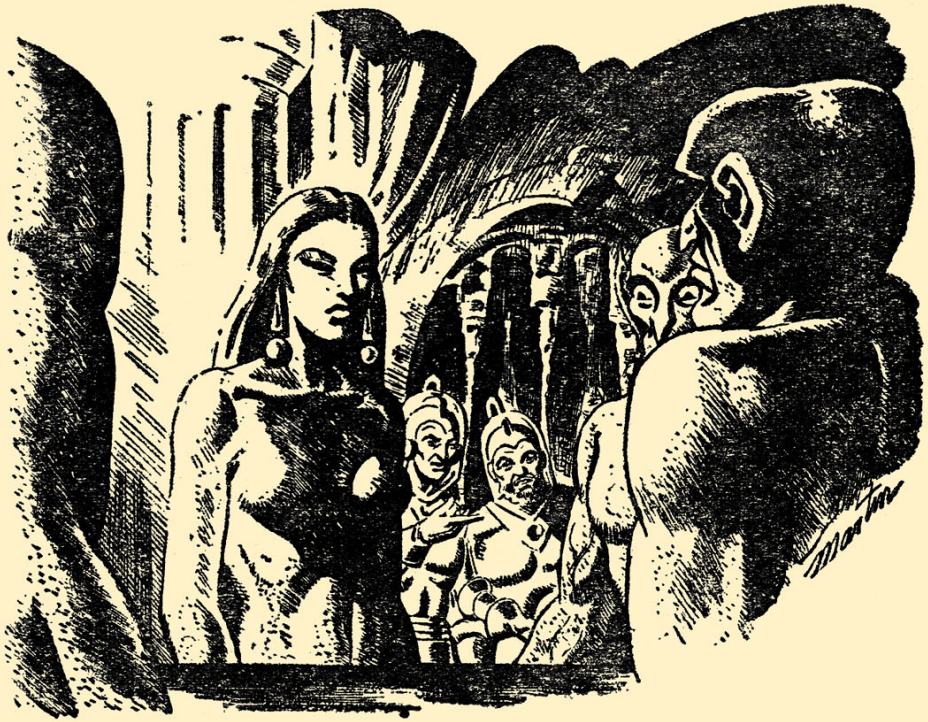
The warmth of his hands had softened the purple wax, and he

(Continued on page 127)

THE PUZZLE OF PRIIPIIRII

By William Tenn

Trapped in an underground sacrificial chamber on a deserted planet, those explorers learned that freedom lay in the solution of a puzzle a quarter-million years old—with lingering death as the penalty for failure.



THE BRAVELY questing light of Hartwick's helmet beam disclosed the tunnel abruptly becoming five more as it dipped sharply down. He halted, perplexedly scratching his transparent visor with a metal-gloved hand.

Unable to stop short, Boule, the expedition's photographer, tripped into him, cursed, and cursed again as the three scientists piled up against his back with weirdly echoing crashes of spacesuit against spacesuit.

"Careful, Hartwick, careful!" Lutzman's bass voice warned into their headsets from the rear. "Another tangle like that and we'll rip the line to Bhishani."

The guide nodded abstractedly at the bioareologist. He spent a long, careful glance at the faintly fluorescing cable connecting the loops in their suits and stretching lengthily behind them through corridor after intersecting corridor to the assistant archaeologist on the surface. The cable was their link with life.

"Five more branchings," he stated at last, pointing ahead.

"An honest-to-Minotaur labyrinth," Punnello, the senior archaeologist, muttered as he extricated himself from between Boule and Lutzman and peered over Hartwick's shoulder. "We differ from Theseus only in that we use an insulated wire instead of a spool of thread."

"And that we won't find a Martian version of the bull-man monster in the heart of this neurotic temple," the bioareologist pointed out. "Not that I look forward to it; he'd be rather hungry after—how long?"

Punnello shrugged his shoulders resoundingly. "At least a quarter of a million years since Priipiirii had a worshipper. No, from those wall friezes we've been passing, I'd say he was arthropomorphic enough—as crustacean as the race which conceived him."

"Which isn't very crustacean according to Earth standards," Lutzman observed. "Why does he continually change his sex? When we dug away the sand and stepped through that first trapdoor on the roof, there was a large statue of him as a male in front of the cross-passage. After the first level, there were only female representations; they became hermaphrodite and later neuter. Down here, he shifts back and forth through all four in each frieze. And yet the Priipiirii ideogram on each of his pictures is unmistakable.

"Why, for the matter, isn't there an occasional hint of the daily life of the average mortal, such as we found in the other temples? They showed their gods being worshipped and occasionally disregarded; here, there is a steady reiteration of Priipiirii only—Priipiirii at work and at play, as it were. Odd, that business of play, considering how evil other Martians thought him."

"Don't *you?*" Boule asked suddenly. "I've been snapping flash shots of this jovial character in all his phases and I like him less all the time. I don't know why ancient Mars tabooed him, but he sure radiates the impression of happy executioner. Frankly, I'm sorry I came on this jaunt. I don't relish wandering around in the place where the Martian devil was worshipped; and I still haven't accepted those trapdoors on the roof of the temple—as if the inhabitants knew it would be buried by the desert one day."

Hartwick paused in the middle of an impatient gesture at the five tunnels ahead of them and swept his helmet light through the gloom until it came to rest on Boule's visored face. Back in Bubbleburg, when he'd been commissioned to lead an expedition to the fabled temple of Priipiirii, the Martian Archaeological Foundation had assured him that the scientists of the party would all be picked, psycho-certified men.

But they'd said nothing about guaranteeing the photographer's stability, the desert guide remembered uncomfortably. Boule was one of the few lens-hounds in the archaeological paradise that the dead planet had become: he'd taken pictures of the early excavations at Gulthum and Yeyarneh when the first mumbling hints of

the Priipiirii cult had been noticed; he was a logical choice.

"Very possibly they suspected the end of their canal civilization would invite the desert to creep forward again," Punnello suggested. "I'll admit it is rare to the point of nonexistence for a race to build with a view to its own extinction, but remember what a highly intellectualized—rather than mechanicalized—culture the Martians enjoyed. They were definitely telepathic, probably prescient too. And the reason why Priipiirii frightens you so, seems so alive—"

"If you don't also feel he's alive, why use the present tense?"

"Hah?" The archaeologist's jaw sagged against his facepiece.

"All right!" Hartwick's voice interrupted brusquely. "The big question right now has nothing to do with whether this purple crayfish has horns or a forked tail. Down which of these five holes do you professors want to be led? The slope is getting sharper all the time, so we have to be twice as careful as a trip to Mercury. And if we meet any reincarnations, Boule, don't forget that you, Lutzman and Punnello, each have deadly little kazoos in your mitts, and I'm carrying a bazooka."

"I only wish you weren't holding any *sort of rocket weapon, Boule,"* he added to himself. *"Talk like that in a place like this!"*

The archaeologist turned to Lutzman. "Considering the one-sided sensory orientation of the architects, I think we might as well continue bearing hard to the left. Seems correct, up to now."

"Left?" Lutzman turned from a frowning examination of a mural depicting Priipiirii swimming twistedly in a canal—the back of his thorax and the front of his abdomen submerged. "Not necessarily if—"

THEY all spun round as the hideous clatter began in their rear. The bioareologist stepped forward and squinted up the incline that slanted past multitudinous passageways to the desert surface.

"It's Bhishani!" he shouted. "Must have fallen through the trapdoor and couldn't get to his feet in time!"

Hartwick wasted a quick glance for the sake of certainty at the limb-threshing figure rolling toward them like a compact avalanche. "Get over to the wall!" he yelled. "If he hits us—"

He ran to his right, dragging Boule with him, while Lutzman and Punnello scrambled to the opposite side. Before either pair could correct their error, the Hindu archaeologist bounded into the taut cable connecting them across the tunnel and snapped them around him in a churning conglomeration of bodies.

They bounced hurtfully through the center corridor, ricocheted against a slanting wall and crashed agonizingly to rest upon four red idols on the floor of a spherical room.

Hartwick was on his feet first, testing his suit for leaks and using muscle-flexes to determine if any of his bones were broken. Finding nothing, he reached down and angrily turned Bhishani on his back. "Do you realize what you've done?"

The assistant archaeologist's face sickened to blue under its smashed visor. "Felt a tug on the line," he gasped thinly into his headset. "Lifted trapdoor—leaned over—slipped—not my fault—why did you tug on—" His throat rattled in the almost airless cold.

"Hey, Lutzman!" the guide snapped at the Martian biologist who was groaning himself into an upright position. "Fast! Help me work his headscreen over the crack in the visor."

Together, they tugged at the round

piece of metal at the top of the helmet. The headscreen, too, had been bent by the fall. It was stuck tight. Hartwick abruptly stopped working on its broken hinges and tore it out of place. He fitted it rapidly around the visor and snapped the emergency clips into position. But by the time he saw the rip in Bhishani's oxygen tank, the man's body had relaxed out of life.

"Poor guy," Boule muttered. "Gone just like that."

Punnello was also on his feet. "Perhaps—some of our oxygen—"

"Not a chance," the guide told him. "Mars is too fast for you."

"I can't understand how he felt a tug on the line. If any of us pulled at it, the others would have noticed."

"Work it out tomorrow," Hartwick invited. "Meanwhile, the only way we can be sure of getting out of this lunatic maze is by following the cable while it still reaches to the surface. Let's go!"

He started for the tunnel opening where the wire lay slack, his companions following.

The line was piled inside the tunnel mouth, coil upon scrambled coil!

"Bhishani must have torn it loose when he fell in," Lutzman almost squeaked. He regained control of his voice. "And the desert wind blew it down."

Hartwick nodded and kept going. "It's still roaring. You can feel the rattle of sand on your visor. We can find the trapdoor that way."

He stopped a moment later as the wind disappeared. "Trapdoor must have been blown shut. But the sand makes a track."

The winding path of sand drifted down casually, lazily—but completely. It went past them into the room of four idols and collected in little piles upon the harsh stone floor. Ahead of them, they could see that the tunnels were perfectly clean under the glare of their helmet beams.

"You can't call this an accident," Boule began in a high voice.

"Shut up! I think I can remember the turns we took. We simply reverse them going back. Let's keep moving before it gets hazy."

WITH Hartwick leading, they raced up the weirdly offshooting corridors in their ungainly spacesuits. Their helmet lights made the rapidly successive friezes of the temple's gods seem like a jerky motion picture. Suddenly, the guide slowed to a walk.

"What's the matter?" Punnello gasped from the rear.

"No slope. It's gone level, and we should still be climbing."

They came round a curve in the tunnel—and into the spherical room. Bhishani's body lay near one of the idols. Piles of sand. . . .

One by one, they filed in. Boule said huskily, "A circle."

Hartwick rang a fist against his open metal palm. "Look," he said at last. "Maybe I'm hearing the flutter of bat wings in my bell tower, but I have the odd idea that the maze was rearranged."

"Obviously," Punnello nodded. "The gradient which was present everywhere when we came down has disappeared. But I suggest—and for other reasons than because that way madness lies—that we temporarily gloss over that explanation of our failure to escape—er, to reach the trapdoor. I suggest we concentrate on things like routes."

"It does seem—" the bioareologist cleared his throat. "No."

Boule walked over to the four idols and examined the table at which they sat. "Saea! They're playing a game of saea. *Saea!*"

Hartwick, having observed him remove his kazoo from its holster, unslung his bazooka cautiously. "Know

anything about saea, docs?" he asked, his eyes on the photographer. "Does it help?"

"Not very much," Punnello said slowly as he too looked down at the odd altar. "Directions for play have been deciphered in every Martian ruin, but it's a little too rich for our cerebral blood. The rules are a cross between chess and the Japanese game of *Go*, with the addition of crevices where pieces can be held out of play for a varying number of moves. Why a sculptured problem in saea, now?"

Lutzman moved up. "And do you notice who the players are? Our old friend Priipiirii—all four of him!" He swept an arm around at each enormous scarlet idol. "Masculine, feminine, hermaphrodite, neuter."

"Red's the Martian color of death, isn't it?" the guide inquired.

Punnello nodded abstractedly. "And life. In fact, the combination of the two expresses it better. Here, perhaps— Suppose we work on less metaphysical subjects. Much safer, at the moment."

They agreed rather hastily. Hartwick drew a stylus and a sheet of recordio film from his flank canister; the four of them squatted on the floor near the body of the assistant archaeologist and discussed the matter of routes. They argued about each turn they had taken until they were all convinced of each one. The guide copied the list backwards, in the order which they would come across the intersections while returning. Then, they left the room again, carefully reversing each change of direction.

Fifteen minutes later they were back. They discussed the list, made a few alterations and once more left through the tunnel in which the cable was piled.

The sixth time they came back, Hartwick scaled the sheet of recordio out into one of the tunnels. It spun away, drifted easily back and floated to the floor.

"One last idea," he said. "This *has* to work."

"What's the use?" Boule demanded. "Let's admit what we're all thinking and really get someplace."

Hartwick tightened his grip on the bazooka. "I don't know," he said with a grim attempt at humor. "Are we all thinking?"

The archaeologist shrugged. "We start with the premise that we are the first humans in this temple, and that no humans on Mars have any desire to do us harm."

"Check," the guide told him softly. "Just carry that ball, doc."

"We accept, though on less evidence, that there are no extra-solar creatures operating here, since there was no indication of this site being disturbed and no one has previously observed such creatures in the system. Furthermore, there is no race in the system, other than humanity, which possesses intelligence. Finally, for almost a hundred thousand years, the only animal life which has existed on Mars is the extremely primitive polar beetle. Therefore, the tugging at the line, the death of Bhishani, the loss of the wire path to the surface, all of our difficulties—including the apparent rearrangement of the labyrinth—may be laid to mechanical contrivances which the temple's builders left behind them out of viciousness or religion.

"Such contrivances are not rare in Terrestrial temples, especially of this type. However, we have the fact that Martians tended more to things intellectual—the esthetic and philosophical, say—than to material enterprise. All that we have seen on Mars supports this view: it would seem to be accentuated among this particular people, where, with the exception of the trapdoors, not one remotely mechanical device has been observed.

And if you add the almost sentient malevolence with which we have been frustrated, *logic* leaves only—"

"Only what?"

"Priipiirii," Lutzman finished very gently for the archaeologist. "Priipiirii, and evil deity."

"Well, I'll be— I've been sitting on that notion like crazy, but I never thought a bunch of scientists could swallow it!"

"Reject the implausible," Punnello intoned as if the words were a hymn, "and what is left is the plausible."

"It's true, isn't it?" the photographer demanded. "You feel he's alive, he's near us, don't you?"

HARTWICK looked from one helmeted face to the other, his beam stabbing three separate times around their heads to the curved walls. Then he sat down.

"All right. I'll admit I believe it. But why should I?"

"Well," the archaeologist sank his head on his chest and minced a tiny, meditative circle. "It has been suggested that the powers ascribed to some of the Terrestrial deities really existed, at one time or another, in some form or another; that the very act of widespread belief in a particular god called forth *something* like that god with *some* of his powers on a *temporary* basis. Now, generally, this theory may well be grit for the herds; but here, where you have a race intellectualized out of all human conception, that had achieved a philosophical level higher than the scientific one we may reach in a thousand years, a race that had telepathy, possibly prescience of a sort, and various mental facets outside the scope of our imagination—such a race might well create a living god from its collective mind. A sort of racial super-*id*."

"But why would they need a god? With all that mental equipment, I just can't see them praying exactly."

"Prayer and sacrifice and the granting of favors thereby, is only one of the uses of a divinity. He can fill certain psychological needs which the race may even recognize as such. For example, the warlike inhabitants of Asgard rarely gave boons to suffering Norsemen; they carried on a constant heaven-shattering warfare, however, in the last great battle of which humanity was merely an inconsequential ally. They typified the precarious, bloody existence of the race which had conceived them: they were satisfactory."

"I see that. But how did we get Priipiirii into the psychic flesh again?"

"By thinking about him, by believing in him. Those wall friezes were probably not designed for that purpose, but seeing them helped solidify our mental pictures of the god. I think Boule was the first affected, since it was his job to take photos of the most significant sculptures. All of us were slightly, as these people knew how to pack an esthetic wallop—but Boule most of all. When he came to believe that Priipiirii was alive—well, Bhishani felt a tug on the line."

Hartwick exhaled against his visor. "Okay, I'll ride along. But we have a little problem of diminishing oxygen. We do what?"

"Find out what he wants," Boule replied loudly. "And give it to him. Sacrifices, propitiation—"

The archaeologist shook his head. "Not sacrifices necessarily. Propitiation if we can deduce enough of his innate qualities to make it possible. But that will be very difficult, considering the alien quality of his former worshippers, the very little data and time we have available for deductions— Hello! Speak of the devil and you do get data!"

Above their heads, in the exact center of the room, a violet cloud had

appeared. Luxuriously, it formed itself into the familiar figure of Priipiirii—masculine version.

Invisible fear dripped through their airtight suits and drenched their skins.

LUTZMAN rose, his eyes narrowed. "Why do you suppose he shows himself? Because we all admit belief in him now? Because he wants to gloat over our helplessness? Because he's vain? He doesn't seem interested in making any overt move—all he can do, hanging up there like that, is confuse the issue."

"He wants worshippers, he wants sacrifices," Boule insisted. "All of the dying-god cults on Earth follow that pattern. It *must* be the same on Mars. Changing from sex to sex—I read somewhere that was a manifestation of what they call a dying-god. Right, Punnello?"

"No. Occasionally there is a hint of hermaphroditism or feminization in some of the dying-gods Earth has known in the past. But not all four forms at once. Not even on Mars—"

"What's to prevent us from no longer believing in him?" Hartwick wanted to know. "Then he and his powers no longer exist."

"With all these statues and pictures around you? Hah! That's like that game—'don't think of a white horse!' No, we have to work out the component parts of his nature. This race engaged in both sex and agriculture in a very offhand—or offclaw way—so he couldn't be a regenerative deity. Now, can anyone say what's *really* intellectual?"

No answer. They stared up at the carelessly undulating horror.

"I want to examine his solidity," Lutzman observed suddenly and slipped his kazoo from its holster. Boule and Hartwick both leaped at him—a moment tardily.

The tiny rocket shell whizzed through the hovering monster and exploded against the domed ceiling. A crack appeared in the highly polished stone, was wiped abruptly clean again as Priipiirii shot over toward it. He raced around the inner room as if inspecting it for further damage. Finding none, he resumed his position.

Hartwick had reached Lutzman first and plucked his weapon away with a muscled grab. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Boule jerk to a stop and level his kazoo at the specialist in Martian biology.

He swung back again fast, desperately. Boule pressed the firing stud and threw himself aside. The rocket hissed past Hartwick; an immense gong seemed to ring in their headphones as Lutzman exploded before he could scream.

The guide tottered past Boule, sickeningly off balance. He knew the gun was centered on his back, that momentum was carrying him too fast in the heavy suit to permit him to turn and fire first. And there were three more rockets in the kazoo's chamber. . . .

He cursed all unstable photographers and the dim-witted archaeological foundations that permitted them to go on such highly charged expeditions without adequate psychological probing. He heard the sibilant exhalation of a shell and his body tried to hold itself together against the moment when it would be ripped apart.

Then there was the explosion—and he was still alive.

Hartwick turned slowly. There were clean bits of metal and ugly shreds of flesh all over the room. Outside of the twisting, somehow exultant Priipiirii, he and Punnello were alone.

The archaeologist sheathed the kazoo with which he had killed Boule before he could fire at Hartwick. "Sacrifice," he mumbled distractedly.

"He was trying to sacrifice you as well as Lutzman for having blasphemed. The fool! I tried to tell him Terrestrial standards of divinity didn't apply. He was so desperate of his own life, so anxious to placate—Imagine trying to propitiate a god with the subtle origins of Priipiirii by a hideously blunt sacrifice!"

"Blunt or no, that little rumpus sure cut down our strength. By any other name, they're still sacrifices—and from the look of that crayfish, I'd say he was enjoying them. Thanks for the shot, doc."

Punnello nodded and grimaced at the crustacean god who was now writhing in unmistakable ecstasy. "Evil, evil. Yet it's obvious there's no direct malice involved. With his powers—consider the ease with which he patched the hole in the ceiling—he could undoubtedly dispose of us in unnumbered horrific ways. Somehow or other, we *are* giving him the kind of worship he wants—how? The god of the most advanced and most decadent of the mind-stretching Martians—from what we've deciphered in the other tombs we know that his people were both detested and immensely respected. But what is he?"

Hartwick frowned. "Look, I've been wondering. All those pictures of him we saw as we came down, the ones you said made us believe in him. Couldn't they have been put there just for that purpose?"

"No. Much more likely, they were meant to help the creatures who worshipped him, by giving them clues as to what to expect. It just occurred to me: this god or super-Martian, who was created out of the united aspirations and interests of a race, probably destroyed it. There is every indication that he is highly egocentric; the other temples hinted at his destructiveness. They didn't discuss *him*, however; almost as if they were too close to worship themselves."

The guide nodded and pulled a long stick of chalk from his flank canister. "Save it. I don't think you could work out his nature if you stood on your head and walked around on your ears. Who knows what in space those brainy crayfish considered holy? And if we did figure it out, how much chance would we have of giving him what he wants? No, let it ride. I said I had one last idea as to how to crack this joint—let's try it."

Gently, Punnello smiled at the chalk. "Oh, that. No, I'm afraid it won't work. If he can rearrange the maze, if he can repair holes we make in the stone with our rocket shells—"

He walked slowly to the four idols sitting about their involved game. "Somehow, I'm positive that this is the answer. Why all four manifestations of Priipiirii playing saea against each other? Why an altar which is nothing more than a problem in saea? If we can solve the problem, now, it might loosen something essential in the god's powers. There had to be a reason for this stone game."

"Listen, doc," Hartwick urged. "I've seen too many archaeologists talking through the top of their heads because they tried to learn saea. And this problem they set up here is bound to be ultimate stuff. Give it the go-by, and come with me."

Punnello hadn't heard. He was standing before the board, studying the carved pieces carefully. From time to time, he made motions with a metal-covered hand.

HARTWICK shrugged and strode into the cable-littered tunnel. He bent over and made a cross on the floor every ten steps. "If my oxygen holds out, I should make it," he pondered. "No more circle-walking."

After he had gone a hundred feet, he gave up and wandered aimlessly: Chalk cross-marks had appeared on the floor ahead, in every tunnel. . . .

When he arrived in the spheroid room again, he walked directly to Punnello's gesticulating figure. He froze when he saw the archaeologist's contorted face, now screaming at the four red idols, now raised in anguish to the god floating in his carnate purple. He understood the muted gibberings he had been hearing in the headset for the past fifteen minutes—and had dismissed as Punnello's necessary self-communion over the saea problem.

Punnello stood before the immutable saea problem—and was mad.

The guide clenched his fist fiercely, then sighed and opened his fingers wearily. There was nothing to strike, nothing to grip, nothing. . . .

He dropped to the floor and spread himself on his back. The moment he lay down, Priipiirii left the insane archaeologist to undulate over him.

"What *are* you?" he wondered, noticing the first faint foulness in his oxygen supply. "What do you want? Why do you tear us down this way, when we've done nothing to you? You aren't the kind of god who would punish for desecration of his temple?"

As if in reply, the deity went through all of his sexual forms, ending up as masculine once more. Hartwick watched, cursing.

His sanity began to slip into the narrow chasm of the problem. He got a grip on it by reverting to practical approaches. Lutzman had taken a shot at it. Perhaps—

His oxygen already was dangerously low.

He shot at it several times. Useless. Weapons were useless here. Lutzman shouldn't have tried. If Lutzman hadn't been killed he might have been able to work out the god's desires from crustacean psychology.

An angle! His mind, fogged by the poisons his respiratory system was inhaling in lieu of air, groped desperately. What—what would be a highly intellectuallized crustacean viewpoint? Not really crustacean, though—Martian biology was so different that bioareology was the name of the science here—Lutzman, now, Lutzman might have. . . .

Desperate struggling through the night that was coming down over his brain. It was such torment to breathe—to think—Crustacean—that was it—all he had to do was work out something peculiarly crustacean—

Priipiirii replied again. This time, he became a fish, a mammoth, a Martian polar beetle, in turn. Then himself again.

Hartwick's mind, Hartwick's life, slipped out too fast for him to hold on. Faster—

Above him, the god watched the approaching extinction of his last worshipper—which meant his own extinction, too—with courteous delight. Faster and more ecstatic grew his squirmings over the two dying lunatics in the temple of a dead and decadent race. So sweet to receive again obeisance from insanity!

For was not Priipiirii most gloriously and intricately the God of Puzzles?

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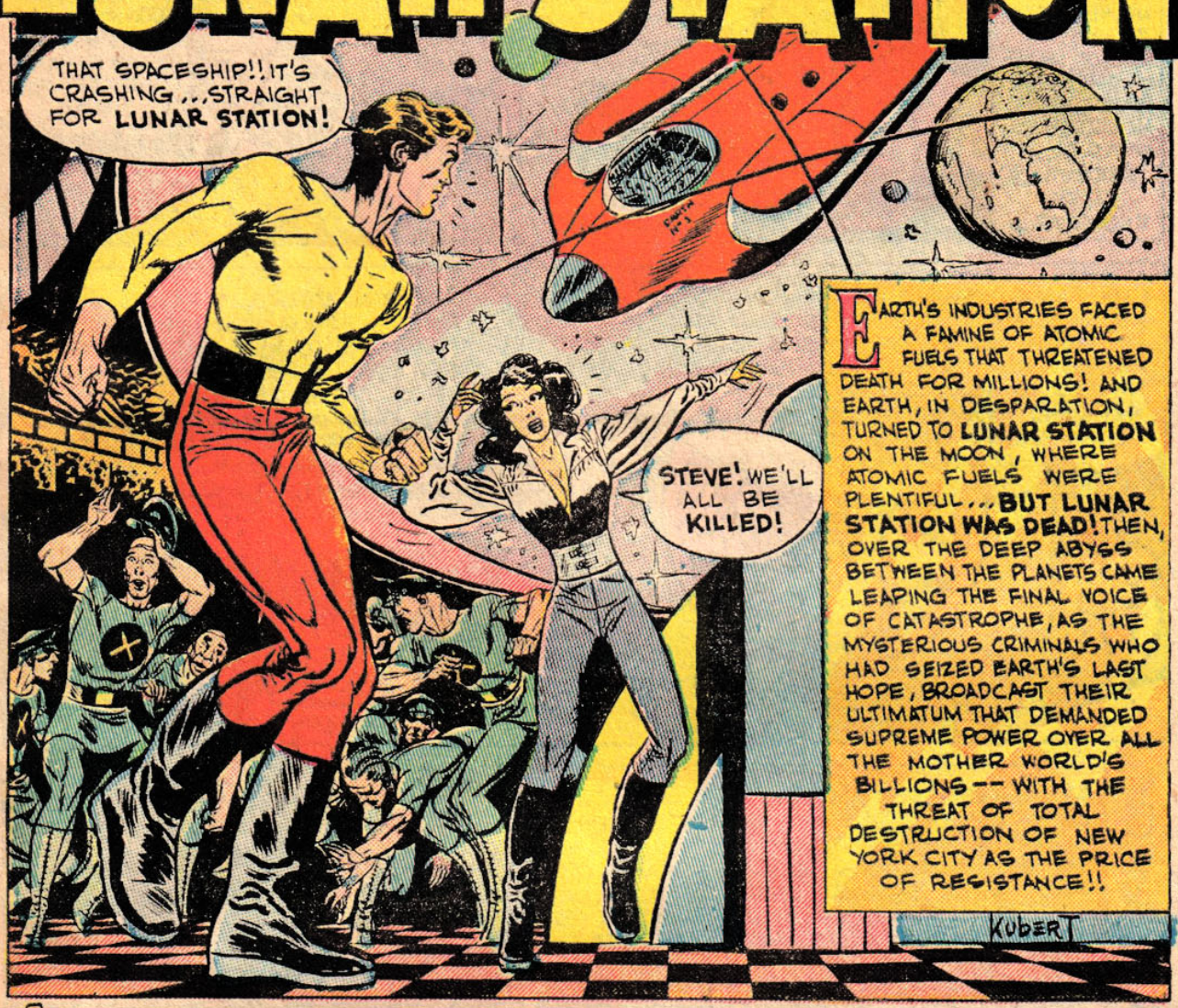
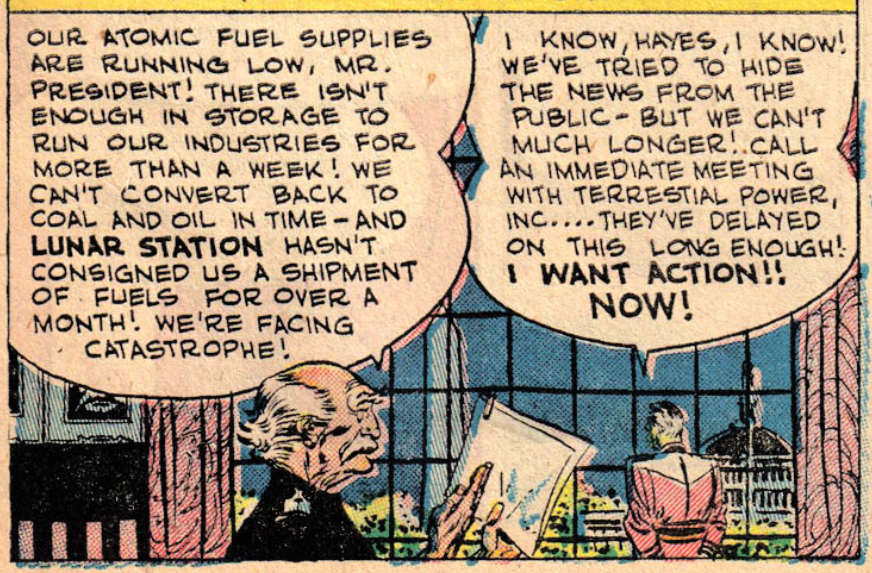
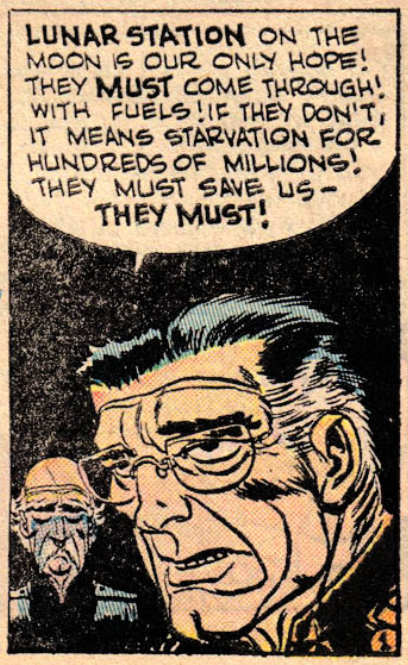
LUNAR STATION



EARTH'S INDUSTRIES FACED A FAMINE OF ATOMIC FUELS THAT THREATENED DEATH FOR MILLIONS! AND EARTH, IN DESPARATION, TURNED TO **LUNAR STATION** ON THE MOON, WHERE ATOMIC FUELS WERE PLENTIFUL... **BUT LUNAR STATION WAS DEAD!** THEN, OVER THE DEEP ABYSS BETWEEN THE PLANETS CAME LEAPING THE FINAL VOICE OF CATASTROPHE, AS THE MYSTERIOUS CRIMINALS WHO HAD SEIZED EARTH'S LAST HOPE, BROADCAST THEIR ULTIMATUM THAT DEMANDED SUPREME POWER OVER ALL THE MOTHER WORLD'S BILLIONS -- WITH THE THREAT OF TOTAL DESTRUCTION OF NEW YORK CITY AS THE PRICE OF REGISTANCE!!

AT THE MAIN OFFICE OF THE ATOMIC FUELS COMMISSION IN WASHINGTON, JARED SMITH, THE COMMISSION'S PRESIDENT, RECEIVES BAD NEWS!...





AN HOUR LATER, AT TERRESTIAL POWER, INC., JUST OUTSIDE OF WASHINGTON, JOAN McCLELLAND, SECRETARY TO WILLIAM HARMON, HEAD OF TERRESTIAL POWER, HANDS AN ORDER TO STEVE DRUM, TERRESTIAL'S CHIEF ENGINEER...

THE MEETING WITH THE PRESIDENT BEGINS IN FIVE MINUTES, STEVE, AND HARMON WANTS YOU TO ATTEND. OH, STEVE, WHAT DO YOU THINK IT MEANS?

I DON'T KNOW YET, DARLING-BUT WE'LL SOON FIND OUT! THERE'S SOMETHING WRONG ON **LUNAR STATION**, AND-

STEVE... MY FATHER'S IN COMMAND OF **LUNAR STATION!** THEY'LL BLAME **HIM** FOR THE FUEL SHORTAGE - STRIP HIM OF HIS RANK- HE COULDN'T STAND IT!

DON'T WORRY, DARLING. I KNOW YOU HAVEN'T HEARD FROM HIM FOR WEEKS, BUT THAT'S NO PROOF OF ANYTHING! COME ON - LET'S GO! THEY MUST BE WAITING FOR US!

I'VE CALLED THIS MEETING, HARMON, AS AN EMERGENCY! WE'VE GIVEN YOU AS MUCH LEEWAY AS WE CAN, MUCH AGAINST OUR BETTER JUDGMENT! YOU WANTED TO HANDLE THIS YOUR OWN WAY - AND NOW THE ATOMIC FUEL COMMISSION WANTS AN ACCOUNTING!

I'LL GIVE IT TO YOU STRAIGHT FROM THE SHOULDER, SMITH! **LUNAR STATION HAS BEEN CUT OFF FROM RADIO AND RADAR CONTACT WITH US FOR TWO WEEKS!** I DIDN'T DARE REPORT IT, FOR FEAR OF PUBLIC UNREST. AND THREE OF OUR OWN SHIPS HAVE BEEN SHOT DOWN WHILE TRYING TO LAND AT THE STATION! RIGHT NOW, OUR COMMUNICATIONS ENGINEERS ARE TRYING TO BREAK THROUGH THE RADAR BARRIER OF THE STATION!

SUSPENSE

ATTENTION! ATTENTION! CAPTAIN McCLELLAND OF ORGANIZATION X SPEAKING TO PRESIDENT SMITH! WE HAVE SEIZED CONTROL OF **LUNAR STATION!** WE KNOW OF THE ATOMIC SHORTAGE ON EARTH... AND WE WILL ACT TO ENFORCE IT, UNLESS OUR TERMS ARE MET. WE WILL BROADCAST OUR TERMS WITHIN THREE HOURS! KEEP TUNED TO THIS WAVE LENGTH, SMITH, AND INFORM THE GOVERNMENT!...THIS IS CAPTAIN McCLELLAND... SIGNING OFF...!

IT'S - IT'S MY FATHER'S VOICE! I - I - CAN'T BELIEVE IT!!

EASY, JOAN! -

I'M SORRY, JOAN! I KNOW HOW HARD IT MUST BE FOR YOU TO REALIZE THAT YOUR FATHER IS A CRIMINAL. STEVE, I WANT YOU TO TAKE OFF IMMEDIATELY! YOU'RE THE ONLY MAN ON EARTH WHO KNOWS **LUNAR STATION** - AND HOW TO GET INTO IT!

YES, SIR... BUT WHY NOT JUST BLAST **LUNAR STATION** OFF THE MOON?

HARMON'S RIGHT, STEVE! WE CAN'T RISK THE DESTRUCTION OF **LUNAR STATION!!** MILLIONS WOULD DIE OF STARVATION! - YOU'RE EARTH'S LAST HOPE, STEVE!

STEVE... TAKE ME WITH YOU! I COULDN'T STAND IT BACK HERE, NOT KNOWING... IF - IF MY FATHER IS A **TRAITOR!!**

I CAN'T LET YOU GO, JOAN! I CAN'T RISK YOUR LIFE - BECAUSE I MAY NOT GET THROUGH MYSELF!

GOODBYE, DARLING!... I'LL BE TAKING OFF RIGHT AWAY! WISH ME LUCK...

GOOD LUCK, STEVE!..

I WON'T LET HIM LEAVE WITHOUT ME! I **KNOW** MY FATHER IS **INNOCENT!** AND I'LL PROVE IT! HE **COULDN'T** BE A TRAITOR!

TWENTY MINUTES LATER...

REMEMBER YOUR INSTRUCTIONS, SON! GET INTO **LUNAR STATION** AT ANY COST! AND SIGNAL OUR GUARD FLEET ON THE CODE WAVELENGTH THE INSTANT YOU NEED THEM!

I WILL, SIR! I'LL DO MY BEST. BUT - WHERE'S JOAN? SHE WAS GOING TO SEE ME OFF!

DON'T WORRY ABOUT JOAN, STEVE... WE'LL TAKE CARE OF HER...

THIS BUS'LL OVERPASS A HUNDRED THOUSAND MILES AN HOUR IN OUTER SPACE! I'LL BE AT **LUNAR STATION** BEFORE THEY CAN BROADCAST THEIR ULTIMATUM - IF I CAN MAKE IT AT ALL! BUT I CAN'T HELP FEELING THERE'S SOMETHING QUEER ABOUT THE WHOLE THING...!

AN HOUR AND A HALF LATER, STEVE REACHES THE EQUI-DISTANT POINT BETWEEN EARTH AND ITS SATELLITE - A DISTANCE OF ALMOST TWO HUNDRED THOUSAND MILES!

AND THEN - SUDDENLY...

A SPACESHIP! ORGANIZATION X MUST'VE SPOTTED ME - **BUT HOW COULD THEY?** I'D BETTER CHANGE COURSE - THE CAPTURED SHIPS AT **LUNAR STATION CARRY ATOMIC VOR-TEXES!**

ATTACK!!....

GOT TO... CHANGE... COURSE! BUT - I - I - C - CAN'T... **MOVE! THE VORTEX!** IT'S... **COMING STRAIGHT AT ME!**

ON THE ENEMY SPACESHIP...

GOOD SHOOTING, GUNNER! THE ATOMIC VORTEX ALWAYS PARALYZES BY SHOCK ON FIRST CONTACT... DRUM CAN'T CHANGE HIS COURSE! IN THIRTY SECONDS HE'LL BE BLOWN TO ATOMS BY THE VORTEX'S TERRIFIC PRESSURE! - AND HIS SHIP WITH HIM!

YES, SIR! ORGANIZATION X **CAN'T** FAIL! NOT WHEN IT KNOWS **WHO** TO DESTROY... **AND WHEN!**

AND ABOARD STEVE DRUM'S SHIP, ON WHICH HE THINKS HIMSELF ALONE...

I-I-GUESS - I'M FINISHED - **EARTH'S FINISHED!** X-H-HAS WON...! **WHA-?**

NOT YET, IT HASN'T, STEVE! **THIS WILL CHANGE OUR COURSE!**

JOAN! WHAT ARE YOU DOING ON BOARD? I THOUGHT YOU...

NOT NOW, DARLING - I'LL EXPLAIN LATER! RELEASE THE PROXIMITY FUSE BOMB! WE'VE GOT TO GET THAT **LUNAR SPACE SHIP** BEFORE IT GETS **US!**

YOU IDIOTS! - I TOLD YOU NOT TO FOOL WITH THE ATOMIC VORTEX! IT WAS TOO SLOW!! HE'S LAUNCHED AN ATOM BOMB AT US! **CHANGE COURSE! - CHANGE COURSE!!**

NO USE, SIR! THE BOMB HAS A PROXIMITY FUSE! AND IT'S TRAVELING FASTER THAN WE ARE!

IT'S **HORRIBLE!** HUNDREDS OF MEN KILLED ALREADY - I **HAVE** TO KNOW IF MY FATHER IS THE CAUSE OF ALL THIS, STEVE! I **HAD** TO STOW AWAY!...

THERE'S NOTHING I CAN SAY AFTER YOU'VE JUST SAVED MY LIFE EXCEPT - **THANKS!** BUT - WE'VE ONLY AN HOUR TO REACH **LUNAR STATION! AND EARTH CAN'T WAIT!**

SEVERAL MILES ABOVE THE MOON -

THIS IS AS FAR AS OUR SHIP WILL TAKE US, JOAN...THE REST OF THE TRIP WILL BE VIA OUR PORTABLE ROCKET BELTS! WE CAN'T CHANCE THEIR DISCOVERING US WITH THEIR RADAR SHIELD - BUT THE SHIELD CAN'T DETECT ANYTHING SO SMALL AS A PERSON...

I'M READY, STEVE...

JUST THEN, ORGANIZATION X BROADCASTS ITS ULTIMATUM TO EARTH...

LISTEN, JOAN! THE ULTIMATUM!

ATTENTION ATTENTION

THIS IS CAPTAIN McCLELLAND...X DEMANDS IMMEDIATE CAPITULATION BY EARTH AUTHORITY... IF THERE IS ANY RESISTANCE, X WILL **DESTROY NEW YORK CITY** WITH A HEAT BLAST FROM THE SOLAR MIRROR AT LUNAR STATION! - **THAT-IS-ALL!**

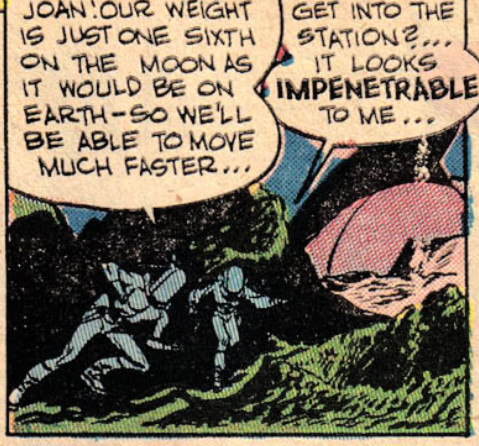
IT **WAS** YOUR FATHER'S VOICE, JOAN! - I'D RECOGNIZE IT ANYWHERE! WE'VE GOT TO GET DOWN THERE QUICKLY - **LET'S GO!**

SOMETHING MUST BE WRONG... MY FATHER **COULDN'T** DO SUCH A THING - HE JUST **COULDN'T!**

As the two figures float down to the moon's surface -

WE MADE IT! I don't think we were detected, Joan! Our weight is just one sixth on the moon as it would be on earth - so we'll be able to move much faster...

B-but, Steve - I don't see how we can get into the station?... It looks **IMPENETRABLE** to me...

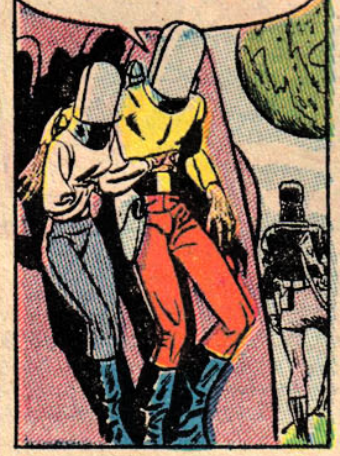


Minutes later, Joan and Steve are beneath the great walls, - the mysterious **LUNAR STATION!**

The walls are **SOLID STEEL!** How are we going to get in?

I helped design the station, Joan... I know it as well as I do my own hand! There's an airlock two hundred feet from here... Careful, now...

There's a guard at the airlock... I'll have to jump him! A pistol blast'd be picked up by their detector screens - no pistol bullet could penetrate his armor, anyway! Here goes...



Quietly, now - quietly...

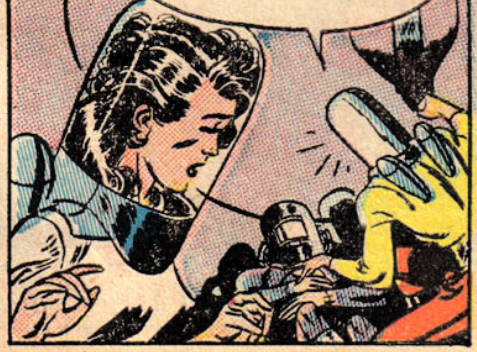
Okay, buddy, relax! You won't be breathing for a while!

Steve - **YOU DID IT!** But - but - is he -?

GUGHA

Steve - is - is he... **DEAD?**

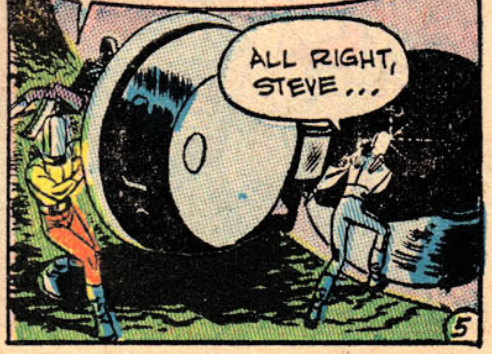
Not by a longshot, Joan! He's just been rendered unconscious for lack of air - I closed his visor! He'll be out for an hour or so until his air supply builds up again!



After binding the guard with his own belt...

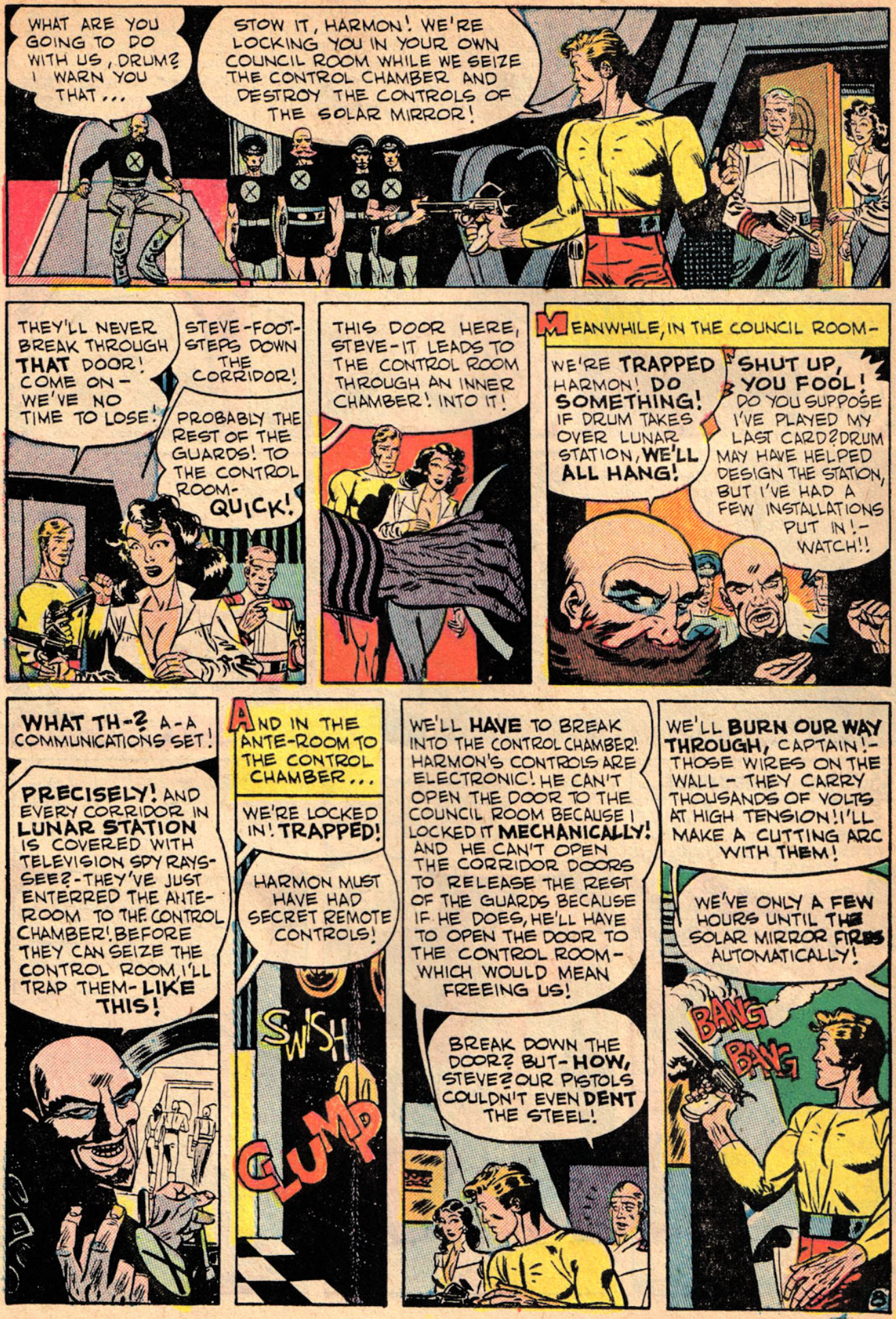
Into the airlock, Joan! - Hurry! I'll open the inner door in a second! And be ready - there's another guard on the other side of the lock

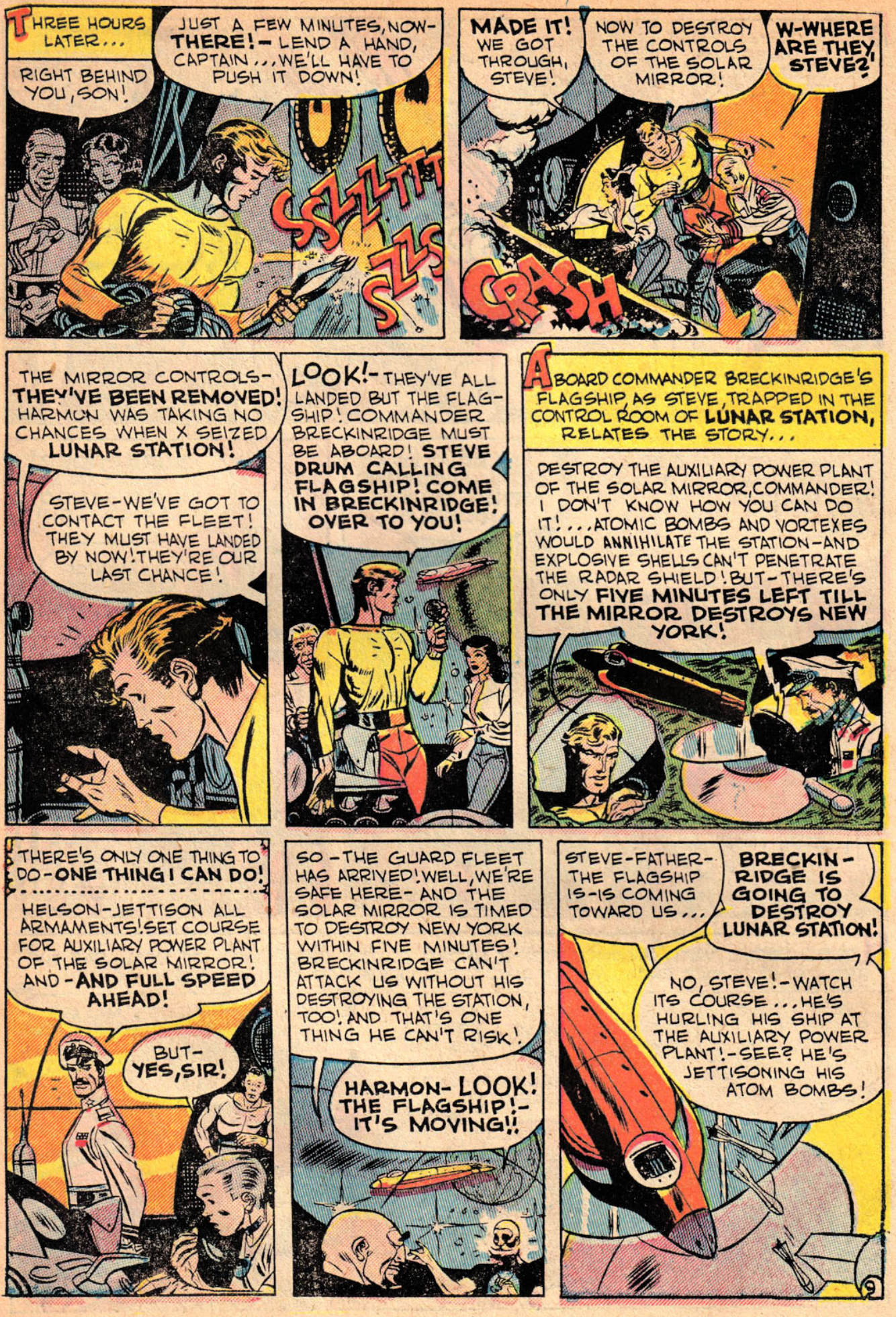
All right, Steve...



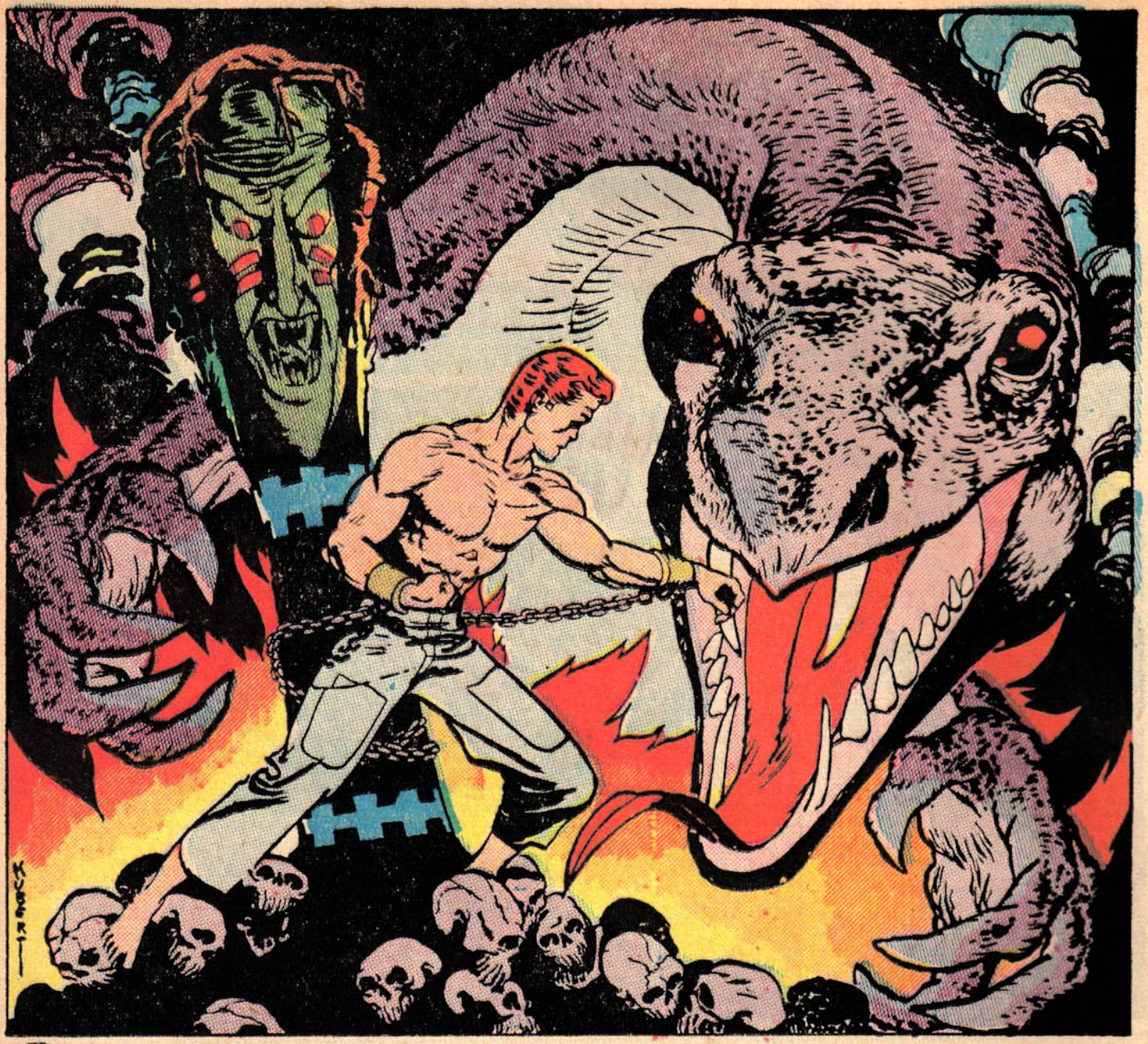
THE INNER DOOR SWINGS OPEN AS STEVE TRIPS THE LOCK, AND...
WHA...? SPIES! I'LL... UGH!
YOU WON'T GIVE ANY ALARM!- AND THIS SHOULD CONVINCE YOU OF MY INTENTIONS!
BAM
STEVE... AN ALARM BELL!...
THEY MUST HAVE INSTALLED PHOTO-ELECTRIC BEAMS! QUICK- DOWN THE CORRIDOR! WE'VE GOT TO REACH THE CONTROL ROOM AND DESTROY THE POWER ACCUMULATORS OF THE SOLAR MIRROR!
RING
BUT SUDDENLY, AT THE OTHER END OF THE CORRIDOR-
SPIES!- THEY'VE BROKEN INTO LUNAR STATION! TAKE THEM ALIVE!
STEVE-WE'RE TRAPPED!
LET 'EM HAVE IT, JOAN- THERE'S NO OTHER WAY OUT!
SURRENDER, DRUM! YOU'RE OUTNUMBERED!
STEVE-HE KNOWS WHO YOU ARE!
HE'LL KNOW ME BETTER IN A MINUTE!
JOAN!
THIS'LL QUIET YOU, DRUM!
UGH!
ROUGH HANDS SEIZE JOAN AND STEVE, AND FORCE THE STUNNED PAIR BEFORE THEM...
TAKE THEM TO THE HIGH COMMAND! HE'LL DEAL WITH THEM PROPERLY!
AYE, AYE, SIR!
THE TWO ARE ORDERED INTO THE MAIN CONTROL ROOM OF LUNAR STATION... WHERE JOAN SEES HER FATHER, CAPTAIN McCLELLAND- UNDER GUARD OF ORGANIZATION X!
DAD! OH, DAD!... I KNEW YOU WERE INNOCENT!
JOAN- M-MY DEAR...
BRING THEM IN! WE'VE BEEN EXPECTING THEM!
6

STEVE QUICKLY TURNS, TO FACE...
HARMON! YOU? SO-TERRESTRIAL POWER, INC., IS REALLY ORGANIZATION X! NO WONDER YOU KNEW EVERY MOVE I MADE!
QUITE SO, STEVE! YOU WERE THE ONE PERSON WE COULDN'T TRUST! YOU'RE LOYAL TO EARTH, AND X DEMANDS LOYALTY TO ITS OWN INTERESTS! IT WAS EASY TO COVER YOUR MOVEMENTS... YOU GOT PAST THE FIRST TRAP WE SET- BUT NOT THE SECOND!
THEY FORCED ME TO BROADCAST, STEVE, AFTER HARMON ORDERED HIS MEN TO SEIZE THE STATION TWO WEEKS AGO. I HAD TO DO IT, STEVE... HE THREATENED TO KILL JOAN IF I DIDN'T!
EXACTLY, McCLELLAND... EXACTLY! A CLEVER PLAN, DON'T YOU THINK, GENTLEMEN? IT WAS EASY TO HOODWINK SMITH! WE GOT HERE BY FAST CRUISER BEFORE YOU, DRUM...
...AND NOW LUNAR STATION IS OURS!- WE'VE PLANNED THIS A LONG TIME! EARTH IS HELPLESS WITHOUT OUR ATOMIC FUELS! EARTH WILL- MUST CAPITULATE! AND THEN- TERRESTRIAL POWER WILL RULE!
YOU CAN'T GET AWAY WITH IT, HARMON...
WHAT MAKES YOU THINK SO, DRUM? WE'RE IMPREGNABLE HERE! THEY DON'T DARE DESTROY LUNAR STATION! WE'VE THOUGHT OF EVERYTHING! AND NOW THAT WE'VE GOT YOU ALL TOGETHER, WE'VE NO FURTHER USE FOR YOU! ALL THREE OF YOU SHALL DIE! GASPING FOR BREATH IN THE CHILL VACUUM BEYOND LUNAR STATION!
STRIP THEM OF THEIR SPACESUITS! THE AIR-LOCK IS WAITING!... HA! HA! HA!
NO...NO! STEVE...
HE'S MAD!
BUT THEN- SUDDENLY...
YOU'VE THOUGHT OF EVERYTHING, HARMON!- EXCEPT THIS!
SEIZE HIM! GUARDS!
TAKE IT EASY, HARMON- YOU'RE SECOND FIDDLE, NOW! CAPTAIN McCLELLAND- TAKE THEIR GUNS!
AYE, SON- I WILL!
KEEP THEM COVERED, CAPTAIN- WHILE I CONTACT THE GUARD FLEET... THEY'RE WAITING AT THE EQUIDISTANT POINT FOR THE SIGNAL!
HURRY, LAD- THERE'S MORE OF THESE DEVILS IN THE STATION! WE'VE GOT TO TAKE THEM!
7

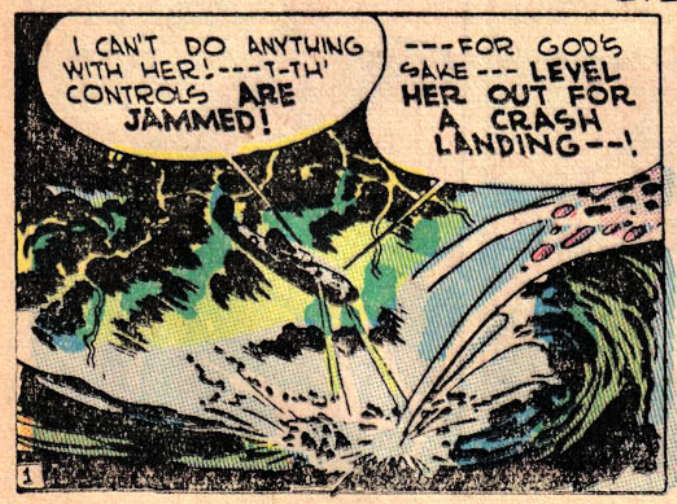

WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO WITH US, DRUM? I WARN YOU THAT...
STOW IT, HARMON! WE'RE LOCKING YOU IN YOUR OWN COUNCIL ROOM WHILE WE SEIZE THE CONTROL CHAMBER AND DESTROY THE CONTROLS OF THE SOLAR MIRROR!
THEY'LL NEVER BREAK THROUGH THAT DOOR! COME ON - WE'VE NO TIME TO LOSE!
STEVE-FOOTSTEPS DOWN THE CORRIDOR!
PROBABLY THE REST OF THE GUARDS! TO THE CONTROL ROOM- QUICK!
THIS DOOR HERE, STEVE - IT LEADS TO THE CONTROL ROOM THROUGH AN INNER CHAMBER! INTO IT!
MEANWHILE, IN THE COUNCIL ROOM -
WE'RE TRAPPED HARMON! DO SOMETHING! IF DRUM TAKES OVER LUNAR STATION, WE'LL ALL HANG!
SHUT UP, YOU FOOL! DO YOU SUPPOSE I'VE PLAYED MY LAST CARD? DRUM MAY HAVE HELPED DESIGN THE STATION, BUT I'VE HAD A FEW INSTALLATIONS PUT IN! - WATCH!!
WHAT TH-? A-A COMMUNICATIONS SET!
PRECISELY! AND EVERY CORRIDOR IN LUNAR STATION IS COVERED WITH TELEVISION SPY RAYS- SEE? - THEY'VE JUST ENTERED THE ANTE-ROOM TO THE CONTROL CHAMBER! BEFORE THEY CAN SEIZE THE CONTROL ROOM, I'LL TRAP THEM - LIKE THIS!
AND IN THE ANTE-ROOM TO THE CONTROL CHAMBER...
WE'RE LOCKED IN! TRAPPED!
HARMON MUST HAVE HAD SECRET REMOTE CONTROLS!
SWISH
CLUMP
WE'LL HAVE TO BREAK INTO THE CONTROL CHAMBER! HARMON'S CONTROLS ARE ELECTRONIC! HE CAN'T OPEN THE DOOR TO THE COUNCIL ROOM BECAUSE I LOCKED IT MECHANICALLY! AND HE CAN'T OPEN THE CORRIDOR DOORS TO RELEASE THE REST OF THE GUARDS BECAUSE IF HE DOES, HE'LL HAVE TO OPEN THE DOOR TO THE CONTROL ROOM - WHICH WOULD MEAN FREEING US!
BREAK DOWN THE DOOR? BUT - HOW, STEVE? OUR PISTOLS COULDN'T EVEN DENT THE STEEL!
WE'LL BURN OUR WAY THROUGH, CAPTAIN! - THOSE WIRES ON THE WALL - THEY CARRY THOUSANDS OF VOLTS AT HIGH TENSION! I'LL MAKE A CUTTING ARC WITH THEM!
WE'VE ONLY A FEW HOURS UNTIL THE SOLAR MIRROR FIRES AUTOMATICALLY!
BANG
BANG

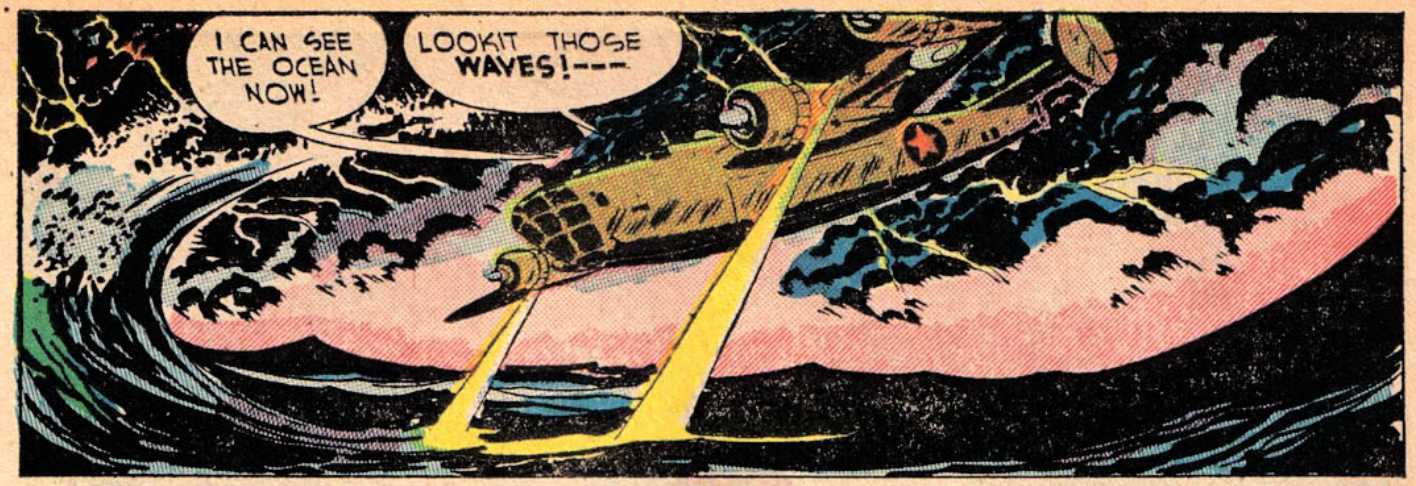

THREE HOURS LATER...
RIGHT BEHIND YOU, SON!
JUST A FEW MINUTES, NOW-THERE! - LEND A HAND, CAPTAIN... WE'LL HAVE TO PUSH IT DOWN!
SSZZTTT
SZZS
MADE IT! WE GOT THROUGH, STEVE!
NOW TO DESTROY THE CONTROLS OF THE SOLAR MIRROR!
W-WHERE ARE THEY, STEVE?
CRASH
THE MIRROR CONTROLS-THEY'VE BEEN REMOVED! HARMON WAS TAKING NO CHANCES WHEN X SEIZED LUNAR STATION!
STEVE-WE'VE GOT TO CONTACT THE FLEET! THEY MUST HAVE LANDED BY NOW! THEY'RE OUR LAST CHANCE!
LOOK! - THEY'VE ALL LANDED BUT THE FLAGSHIP! COMMANDER BRECKINRIDGE MUST BE ABOARD! STEVE DRUM CALLING FLAGSHIP! COME IN BRECKINRIDGE! OVER TO YOU!
ABOARD COMMANDER BRECKINRIDGE'S FLAGSHIP, AS STEVE, TRAPPED IN THE CONTROL ROOM OF LUNAR STATION, RELATES THE STORY...
DESTROY THE AUXILIARY POWER PLANT OF THE SOLAR MIRROR, COMMANDER! I DON'T KNOW HOW YOU CAN DO IT!... ATOMIC BOMBS AND VORTEXES WOULD ANNIHILATE THE STATION - AND EXPLOSIVE SHELLS CAN'T PENETRATE THE RADAR SHIELD! BUT - THERE'S ONLY FIVE MINUTES LEFT TILL THE MIRROR DESTROYS NEW YORK!
THERE'S ONLY ONE THING TO DO - ONE THING I CAN DO!
HELSON - JETTISON ALL ARMAMENTS! SET COURSE FOR AUXILIARY POWER PLANT OF THE SOLAR MIRROR! AND - AND FULL SPEED AHEAD!
BUT - YES, SIR!
SO - THE GUARD FLEET HAS ARRIVED! WELL, WE'RE SAFE HERE - AND THE SOLAR MIRROR IS TIMED TO DESTROY NEW YORK WITHIN FIVE MINUTES! BRECKINRIDGE CAN'T ATTACK US WITHOUT HIS DESTROYING THE STATION, TOO! AND THAT'S ONE THING HE CAN'T RISK!
HARMON - LOOK! THE FLAGSHIP! - IT'S MOVING!!
STEVE - FATHER - THE FLAGSHIP IS - IS COMING TOWARD US...
BRECKIN-RIDGE IS GOING TO DESTROY LUNAR STATION!
NO, STEVE! - WATCH ITS COURSE... HE'S HURLING HIS SHIP AT THE AUXILIARY POWER PLANT! - SEE? HE'S JETTISONING HIS ATOM BOMBS!

AT TREMENDOUS SPEED, DRIVEN BY THE INCONCEIVABLE POWER OF ITS ROCKET MOTORS, COMMANDER BRECKINRIDGE'S FLAGSHIP HURTLES DOWN UPON THE SOLAR MIRROR!
BAARRROOOOOMM
HE'S DONE IT! NEW YORK IS SAFE!
BUT- WHAT AN AWFUL PRICE TO PAY!... THOSE POOR, BRAVE MEN-
STEVE- YOU'RE OPENING THE AIR-LOCKS!
FOR THE GROUND ASSAULT TROOPS! WE'VE STILL GOT TO TAKE CARE OF HARMON AND THE REST OF ORGANIZATION X!
THE AIRLOCKS ARE OPENING! FORWARD, MEN!... ON THE DOUBLE!
SURRENDER! LAY DOWN YOUR ARMS! LUNAR STATION HAS FALLEN!
WE-WE'RE SURROUNDED!
DON'T SHOOT-
HOURS LATER, WITH ORGANIZATION X UNDER GUARD, LONG LINES OF MEN LOAD THE RETURNING SPACE CRAFT WITH ATOMIC FUELS, LIFEBLOOD OF THE MODERN WORLD...
EARTH'S SAVED, STEVE! THEY'RE LOADING THE FUELS NOW!
AND BRECKINRIDGE SAVED IT, JOAN! HE'LL HAVE A BETTER GRAVE THAN THIS HOLE ON THE MOON! HE AND HIS MEN WERE THE GREATEST KIND OF HEROES!
AYE, LAD - HEROES! AND SO LONG AS EARTH HAS MEN LIKE BRECKINRIDGE AND YOU, SHE'LL GET ALONG - SHE'LL GET ALONG!

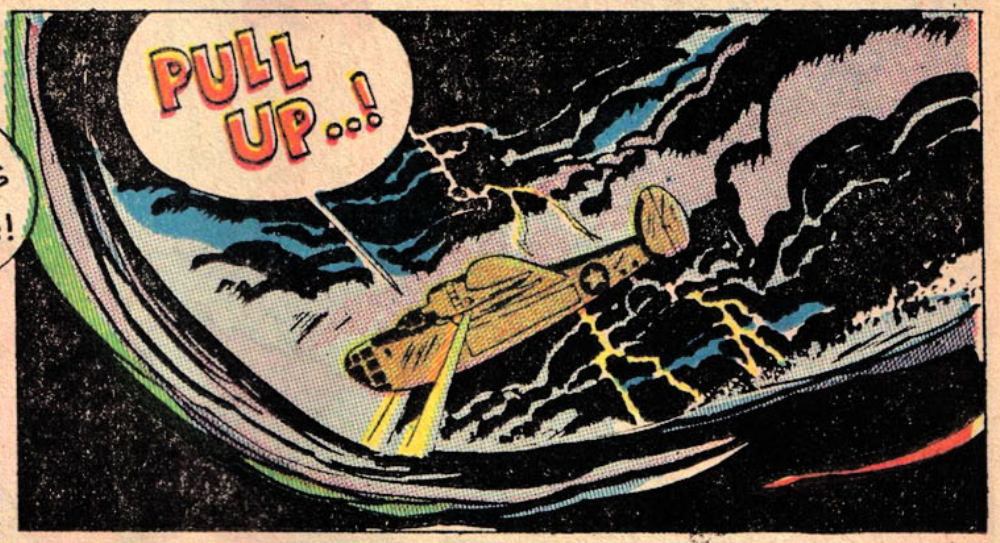


A U.S. MITCHELL BOMBER, ON A REGULAR CHARTING AND AERIAL EXPLORATION FLIGHT FROM ITS BASE IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC, RUNS INTO AN UNFORSEEN STORM... STRUGGLING TO REMAIN ALOFT, LITTLE DO THE AIRMEN KNOW THE HORRIBLE FATE THAT AWAITS THEM ON THE ISLAND OF THE **MAN-EATING LIZARDS!**




I CAN SEE THE OCEAN NOW!
LOOKIT THOSE WAVES!---

BERT! I THINK I'VE GOT HER LEVELED FOR A CRASH...!
B-BUT WE'RE SMACKING INTO THAT GIANT WAVE! PULL UP!


PULL UP...!

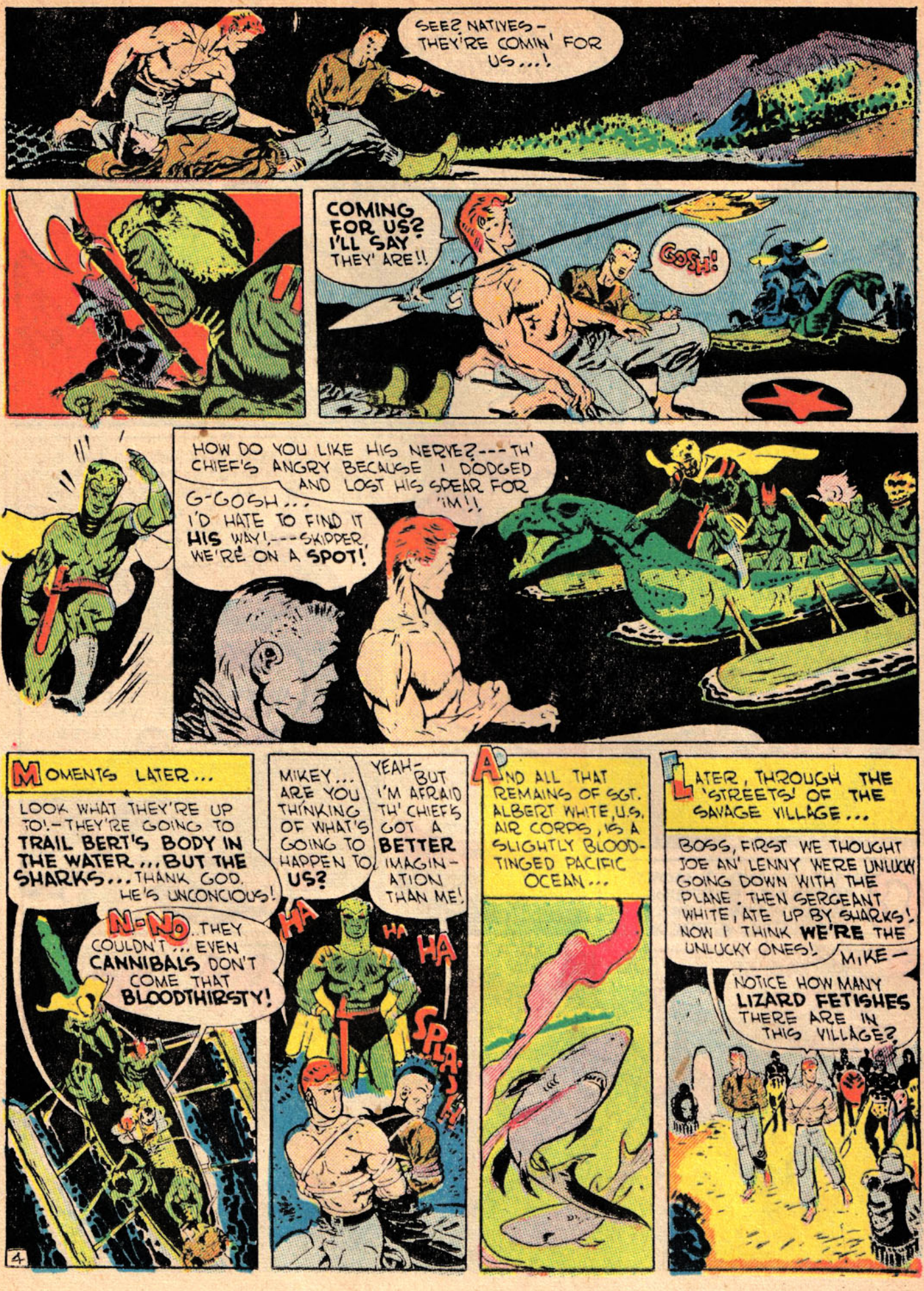
MOMENTS LATER...
THE PLANE'S FILLING LIKE A SPONGE...SHE'LL GO DOWN ANY SECOND! HOPE BERT'S NOT HURT BAD THO HE SURE LOOKS IT!

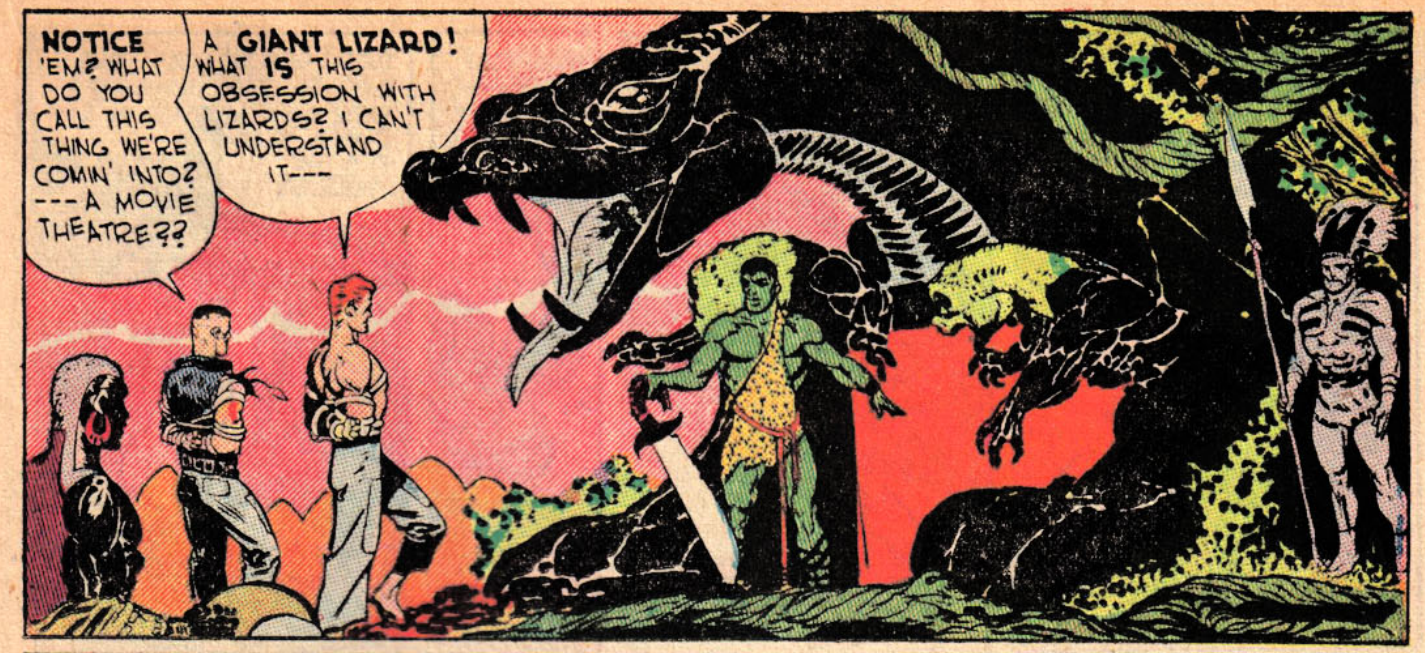
BERT'LL KEEP HERE! THEN AFTER I GET MIKEY OUT, I'LL HAVE TO REACH THAT WING! I STILL DON'T KNOW WHAT'S KEEPIN' THIS HUNK OF CEMENT AFLOAT!

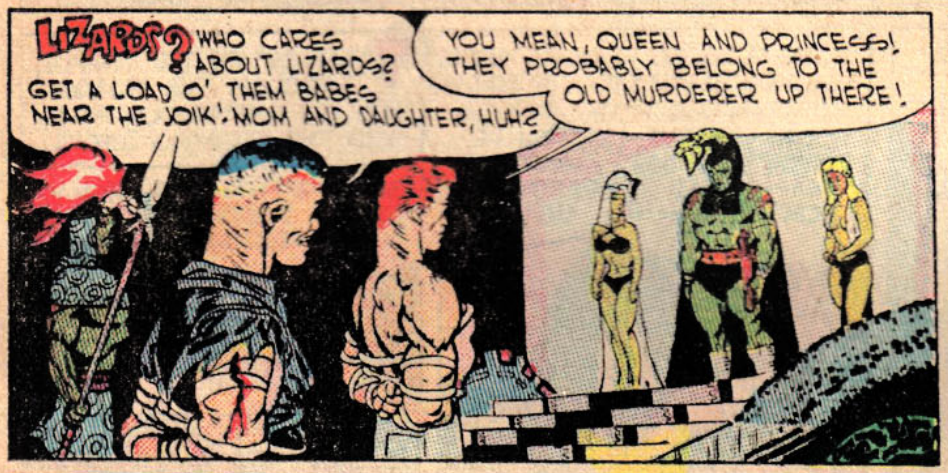
MIKEY, PLEASE ... DON'T CONK OUT ON ME, TOO! I'LL NEVER MAKE IT TO THE WING WITH BOTH OF YOU!---MIKEY!
OOOOH...

THANKS, B-BOSS ...IT'S ME SHOULDER... N-NOT ME---
I KNOW, MIKEY... BUT YOU'VE GOT TO TRY EVEN HARDER

HOW YOU DOING?--- SHOULDER BOTHERING YOU?
P-PLENTY!...BUT WHAT TH' HECK...I BEEN THINKIN' ALL ME LIFE WITH HALF A BRAIN-I GUESS I KIN DO A LITTLE SWIMMIN' WITH HALF ME SHOULDERS!
BOSS!---SHE'S DIVIN'---I MEAN, SHE'S DOVE!
JOE AND LENNY WEREN'T AS LUCKY AS US... POOR GUYS!
I AIN'T SO SURE... MAYBE WE'RE JUST PROLONGIN THE AGONY!
A HALF HOUR LATER...
HOW IS HE?
NOT SO GOOD, MIKEY! ---AFTER THREE YEARS OF FIGHTIN' JAPS, AFTER SEEING THE WAR THROUGH TOGETHER, A LITTLE AERIAL SURVEYING LEADS TO THIS!
---IT'S FUNNY, ISN'T IT?
YEAH, VERY FUNNY! THEM SHARKS THINK IT'S FUNNY, TOO! MAYBE IT'S BECAUSE THEY HAVE ANOTHER POINT OF VIEW...TH' EATIN' SIDE O' THINGS!
HOURS LATER, AS DAWN RISES...
LAND! WILL TH' BOSS BE SURPRISED WHEN HE WAKES UP! MAYBE FRIENDLY NATIVES ARE THERE... MAYBE...
ON THE ISLAND, A MORE STARTLING SURPRISE THAN THAT WHICH MIKEY ANTICIPATES IS PREPARED!
OOLKAH
OOMBAH
OONTAH
HAKOOLA
OONTAH
3

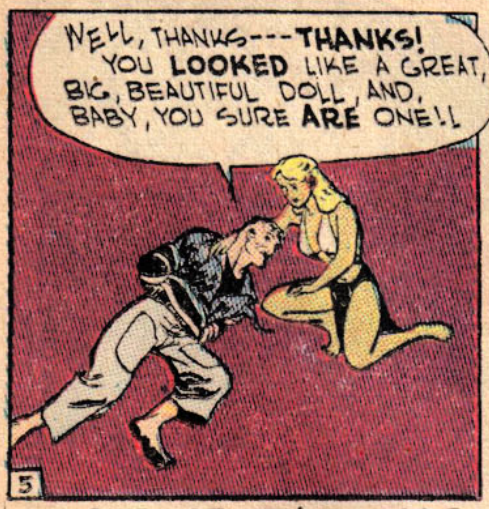

SEE? NATIVES - THEY'RE COMIN' FOR US...!
COMING FOR US? I'LL SAY THEY' ARE!!
GOSH!
HOW DO YOU LIKE HIS NERVE?---TH' CHIEF'S ANGRY BECAUSE I DODGED AND LOST HIS SPEAR FOR 'IM!!
G-GOSH... I'D HATE TO FIND IT HIS WAY!---SKIPPER, WE'RE ON A SPOT!
MOMENTS LATER...
LOOK WHAT THEY'RE UP TO!-THEY'RE GOING TO TRAIL BERT'S BODY IN THE WATER...BUT THE SHARKS...THANK GOD. HE'S UNCONCIOUS!
N-NO..THEY COULDN'T...EVEN CANNIBALS DON'T COME THAT BLOODTHIRSTY!
MIKEY... ARE YOU THINKING OF WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN TO US?
YEAH- BUT I'M AFRAID TH' CHIEF'S GOT A BETTER IMAGIN-ATION THAN ME!
HA HA HA
SPLASH!
AND ALL THAT REMAINS OF SGT. ALBERT WHITE, U.S. AIR CORPS, IS A SLIGHTLY BLOOD-TINGED PACIFIC OCEAN...
LATER, THROUGH THE 'STREETS' OF THE SAVAGE VILLAGE...
BOSS, FIRST WE THOUGHT JOE AN' LENNY WERE UNLUCKY GOING DOWN WITH THE PLANE. THEN SERGEANT WHITE, ATE UP BY SHARKS! NOW I THINK WE'RE THE UNLUCKY ONES!
MIKE-
NOTICE HOW MANY LIZARD FETISHES THERE ARE IN THIS VILLAGE?
4


NOTICE 'EM? WHAT DO YOU CALL THIS THING WE'RE COMIN' INTO? ---A MOVIE THEATRE??
A GIANT LIZARD! WHAT IS THIS OBSESSION WITH LIZARDS? I CAN'T UNDERSTAND IT---


LIZARDS? WHO CARES ABOUT LIZARDS? GET A LOAD O' THEM BABES NEAR THE JOIK! MOM AND DAUGHTER, HUH?
YOU MEAN, QUEEN AND PRINCESS! THEY PROBABLY BELONG TO THE OLD MURDERER UP THERE!

IT'S ALL RIGHT, MIKE... THEY JUST WANT THE SO-CALLED HONOR OF ESCORTING US TO THE CHIEF-
WHEW! AN' I WUZ THINKIN' THEY WERE GOIN' TO EAT US WITHOUT THE BENEFIT O' ROASTIN'! --- AWRIGHT, BUB--- TAKE IT EASY!

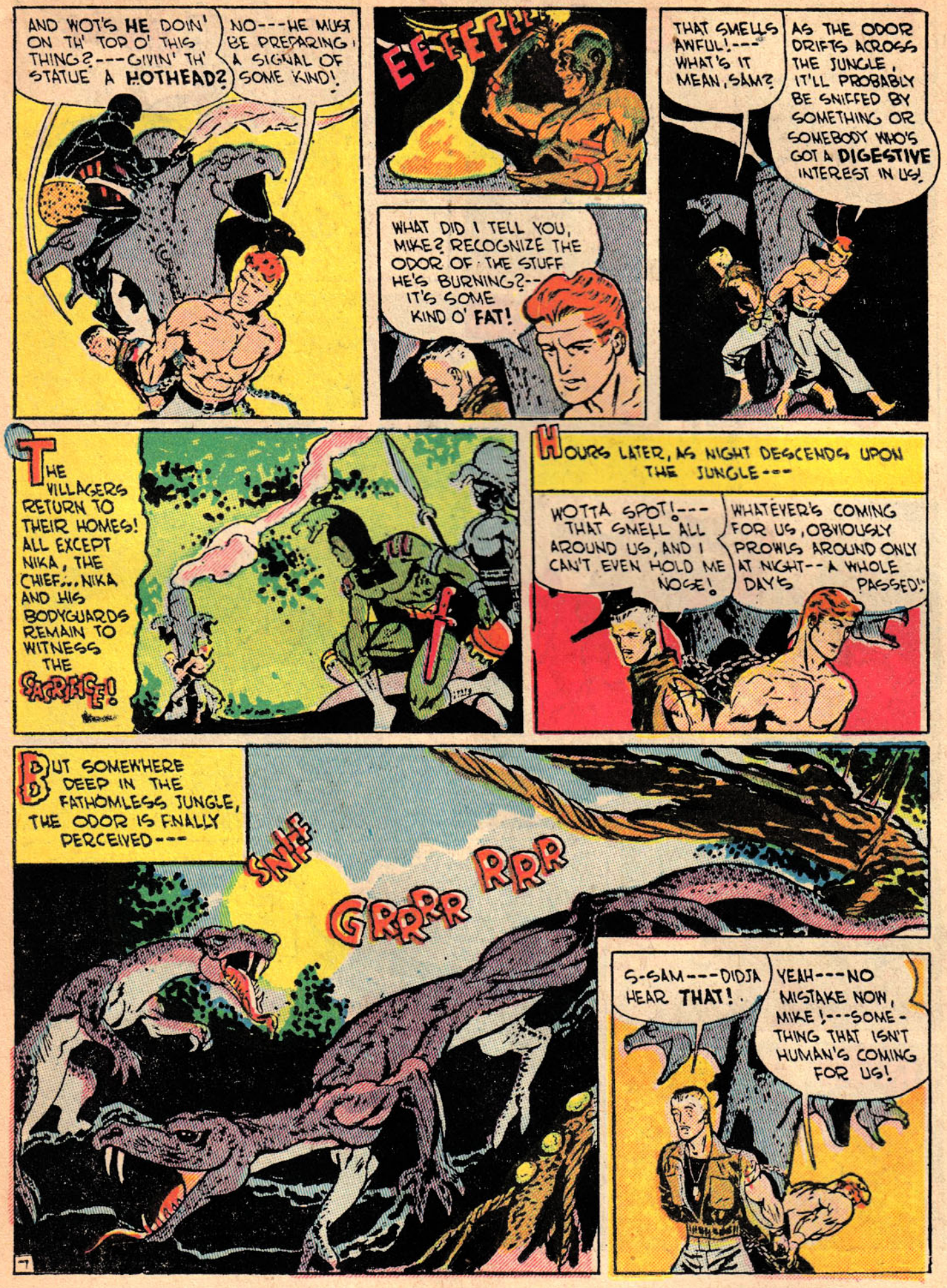
IS THIS WHAT YOU CALL ESCORTIN'? OWWW
THAT'S PROBABLY POLITENESS --- COMPARED TO WHAT'S COMING!!!


WELL, THANKS--- THANKS! YOU LOOKED LIKE A GREAT, BIG, BEAUTIFUL DOLL, AND, BABY, YOU SURE ARE ONE!!

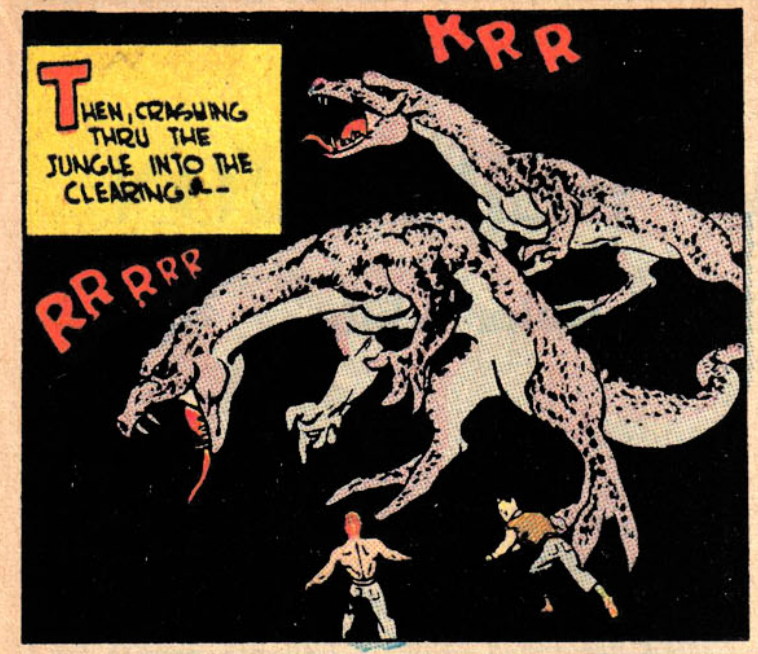
WATCH IT, MIKEY! BIG CHIEF NO LIKE!
SHUNTAK
GOLLY!

LOOK, SAM--- MOMMA COMES TO THE RESCUE! WOT A GAL!

BUT AS IF WARNED BY A SIXTH SENSE---
TOO BAD! THE MONSTER HAS EYES IN THE BACK OF HIS HEAD!
OH.
BRASHTA
WHY, YOU DIRTY--- LET ME G-GO---!
DIDJA SEE TH' LOOK SHE GAVE TH' BIG CHEESE? IF I EVER SEEN MURDER IN A DAMES EYES, IT'S IN HER'S!
WHERE TO NOW? WE GOIN' BYE-BYE AGAIN?
MAYBE THIS TIME FOR GOOD, JUDGING BY HIS GESTURES!!
TO ME IT LOOKS LIKE HE'S BEEFIN' SOMETHIN' 'BOUT FOOD---ABOUT EATIN'! G-GOSH, SAM--- YOU DON'T THINK---?
I DON'T KNOW... IT SURE LOOKS LIKE THAT. IT'S A CINCH HE ISN'T FEEDING US!
THEN, OUT OF THE TEMPLE, THROUGH THE VILLAGE AND ITS MYSTERIOUS WALL, INTO THE STEAMING JUNGLE...
WONDER WHAT THAT WALL IS FOR? A PROTECTION OF SOME KIND---BUT AGAINST WHAT?
LOOKA THAT---LIKE LUNA PARK!
BUT A LOT LESS FUN, MIKE! I'VE A HUNCH THAT THIS IS THE END OF THE LINE... OUR LINE!!
6


AND WOT'S HE DOIN' ON TH' TOP O' THIS THING?---GIVIN' TH' STATUE A HOTHEAD?
NO---HE MUST BE PREPARING A SIGNAL OF SOME KIND!
EE-EEE!
WHAT DID I TELL YOU, MIKE? RECOGNIZE THE ODOR OF THE STUFF HE'S BURNING?-- IT'S SOME KIND O' FAT!
THAT SMELLS AWFUL!--- WHAT'S IT MEAN, SAM?
AS THE ODOR DRIFTS ACROSS THE JUNGLE, IT'LL PROBABLY BE SNIFFED BY SOMETHING OR SOMEBODY WHO'S GOT A DIGESTIVE INTEREST IN US!
THE VILLAGERS RETURN TO THEIR HOMES! ALL EXCEPT NIKA, THE CHIEF... NIKA AND HIS BODYGUARDS REMAIN TO WITNESS THE SACRIFICE!
HOURS LATER, AS NIGHT DESCENDS UPON THE JUNGLE---
WOTTA SPOT!--- THAT SMELL ALL AROUND US, AND I CAN'T EVEN HOLD ME NOSE!
WHATEVER'S COMING FOR US, OBVIOUSLY PROWLS AROUND ONLY AT NIGHT--A WHOLE DAY'S PASSED!
BUT SOMEWHERE DEEP IN THE FATHOMLESS JUNGLE, THE ODOR IS FINALLY PERCEIVED---
SNIFF
GRRRR
RRR
S-SAM---DIDJA HEAR THAT!
YEAH---NO MISTAKE NOW, MIKE!---SOMETHING THAT ISN'T HUMAN'S COMING FOR US!
7

THE SOUND IS ALSO HEARD BY THE VIGILANT SAVAGES, WHEN---
GRRRR RR
SUDDENLY, DEATH STRIKES FROM NO-WHERE
THU-NK
A NOWHERE THAT MATERIALIZES IN BEAUTIFULLY SAVAGE FORM
HPLA
AIII
ROGAH
GHA
THAT'S WHAT ALL THE SCREAMING WAS ABOUT---! THE DAMES'RE RESCUING US, TH' DARLIN'S!
GREAT SCOTT, MIKE--- YOU'RE RIGHT!
RRRRRRR
AFTER BINDING NIKA TO THE SACRIFICIAL POST, THE FOUR NEW-FOUND FRIENDS HEAR THE THUNDERING ROARS GETTING CLOSER!
THEY DIDN'T ARRIVE A SEC TO SOON, SAM---!
8



THEN, CRASHING THRU THE JUNGLE INTO THE CLEARING &--

SAM! LOOK! THAT'S WHAT WE'RE MISSIN'!

GIANT LIZARDS! MANEATING LIZARDS--- THAT'S WHAT ALL THIS LIZARD WORSHIP'S ABOUT!

=WHEW= THEY MUST BE BLIND, NOT SEEING US GO PAST SO CLOSE TO THEM!

THAT'S IT! THAT EXPLAINS THE FAT BURNING! THE MONSTERS ARE BLIND... LUCKILY FOR US!

AS THE AMERICANS WITH NATIVE ESCORT RACE TO FREEDOM, NIKA BEGINS TO REALIZE THE MEANING OF---

RRR RRR R

SACRIFICE

EEEEEE!

AS THE SKY REDDENS WITH DAWN, FAR OUT AT SEA, FAR FROM THE ISLAND OF THE MAN-EATING LIZARDS-

FIRST THEY SAVE US FROM SOLVING THE MEAT SHORTAGE FOR LIZARDS, THEN THEY TELL US WHERE TO FIND PEACEFUL NATIVES! LAST OF ALL, THEY'RE NUTS ABOUT US!- WHAT COULD BE SWEETER, SAM?

THE REPORT I'M MAKING OUT WHEN WE GET BACK TO BASE! THE U.S.A. HAS A LOT OF BARBARISM TO WIPE OUT AND A LOT OF LIZARD-HUNTING TO DO, BEFORE THIS OLD PACIFIC OCEAN IS REALLY PEACEFUL!!

SAM AND MIKE REACHED THEIR BASE A FEW DAYS LATER... A BOMBER SQUADRON MAKES SHORT WORK OF THE ISLAND'S STRANGE, BLOODTHIRSTY INHABITANTS.---AND NOW, THE ISLAND LIES PEACEFULLY ON THE VAST PACIFIC ~

PALLAS REBELLION

By W. Malcolm White

THE first hint about the robot trouble on the planetoid Pallas to reach us came from that intrepid reporter of interplanetary news, Sandra de Long. Sandra had been on Pallas investigating the plutonium mines there.

She hadn't been on the trail of any specific story, but just sort of writing a book about the major asteroids and their scenic interests. Pallas, you know, has the only natural deposit of pure plutonium in the solar system—outside of the debatable and inaccessible claims made for certain mountains on Neptune's smaller moon. Because plutonium is the stuff from which atomic reactors are made, it's valuable and still pretty expensive to fabricate, even in this day and age, two hundred and fifty years after the *Manhattan Project.*

Plutonium, being highly radioactive, is mined exclusively by robots. They are directed from the mining settlement of Valiersdorf, where the Terrestrial technicians and reduction engineers live. Sandra had sent back two stories about the rough-and-ready life of the mining town—mostly pure invention, since the pioneering days have long been past and the hermetically enclosed town is as comfortable as any suburban hamlet on Earth.

But Sandra had an eye for odd detail and she had ferreted out some of the older artifacts, and one of the worked-out pits, and had poked her shapely nose into the robot warrens too. In her last broadcast she had spoken of trouble with the robots. There was a steadily increasing number of inexplicable errors in their work. One technician had already expressed the thought that the radioactivity of the mines was impairing their mechanism

Sandra had suggested that perhaps exposure to the vast power of the plutonium had altered the delicate atomic chargings of the robotic brains. Robots, as you know, are thinking beings in a way—they are equipped with mechanical brains that can and do transact elementary reasoning, enough for their jobs. These brains are fairly delicate and are always enclosed in a transparent shell where their dials and adjustments can be periodically checked.

The next thing we of the Asteroid Patrol knew, word came that Pallas had suddenly gone out of communication with the rest of the universe. Our ships were ordered there.

About our space cruiser there was plenty of speculation about the mission. Ted Winston, our commander, was specially worried, and as his lieutenant, I knew what was bothering him. It wasn't robot trouble, it was Sandra. They were engaged.

When our vessels came in sight of Pallas, everything seemed quiet. True, there was no sign of life in the mines, the doomed town seemed strangely silent and lightless, but nothing was exploding.

We settled for a landing near the town, when the first robot battery opened up on us! It was a near thing, it was what we had expected. The blast of an atom-heat ray just missed our ship —had it hit us, we'd have blown up and that would be the end of this story. But it missed, doubtless because of inexperience and because it wasn't a true weapon. It was a mining beam, up-ended, and being worked as a gun.

We got out of its range and made a landing in a small valley between two tiny Pallasian stony hills.

Pallas is like the rest of the asteroids, a bare, lifeless rocky world. None of these tiny planets have the gravity to hold down an atmosphere, and you can't walk about without a space mask and your own portable air supply

Ted and I took counsel as to what to do next. The question was who had shot at us and why.

Someone had to go out and investigate and it would have to be us. Then Sparks came in and told us there was a message coming in.

It was from the robots. They had announced their independence, they were going to hold the mines and earth crew as hostages, and they were willing to release Sandra de Long to us as evidence of their good faith. Sandra, they announced, would be able to give us the dope on their demands.

It was clear, just the same, that the brains of the robots were cracked. Just the way the thing was worded was proof of it. They couldn't hope to win. Still, Ted told me, if we could get Sandra clear, he'd feel a lot better about dealing with the situation. For of course we could not make a deal with these lunatic machines.

Ted told the robots by radio to bring Sandra to the ship and he would meet them. They must come unarmed. They agreed.

We didn't want Ted to chance it, but he insisted. Sandra was his girl and he wasn't going to let someone else risk her rescue. He put on his air helmet, took his gun, and left the ship; the rest of us watching with baited breath from the ship's observation ports.

Coming towards the ship we could now see a robot and it was carrying something. It came closer. We gasped.

The metal man was carrying Sandra like a sack of potatoes, slung under one arm! The poor girl was wiggling and apparently yelling for help.

Ted Winston stood like a man struck. The sight was certainly calculated to drive him nuts. He couldn't dare attack the robot now, even though he could see the thing was armed and that if it got too close the machine-man could probably destroy our space ships with a good blast—or at least ground them.

Ted was in a spot, and I didn't envy him. He couldn't dare fire, for his shot would destroy Sandra too. He couldn't dare not fire, in spite of robot promises, because the ships and his men were in danger. The robot had violated its promise and was armed.

It was an old gangster trick—the helpless hostage as a shield for the killer.

Then Ted Winston did what we never expected. He dashed forward, raised his flame pistol, and fired! Fired point-blank at the robot —and at Sandra!

The robot sizzled for a moment, and then suddenly the robot simply exploded! There was a terrific flash and when the dust cleased, there was only a hole in the ground and little bits of metal and Sandra scattered about!

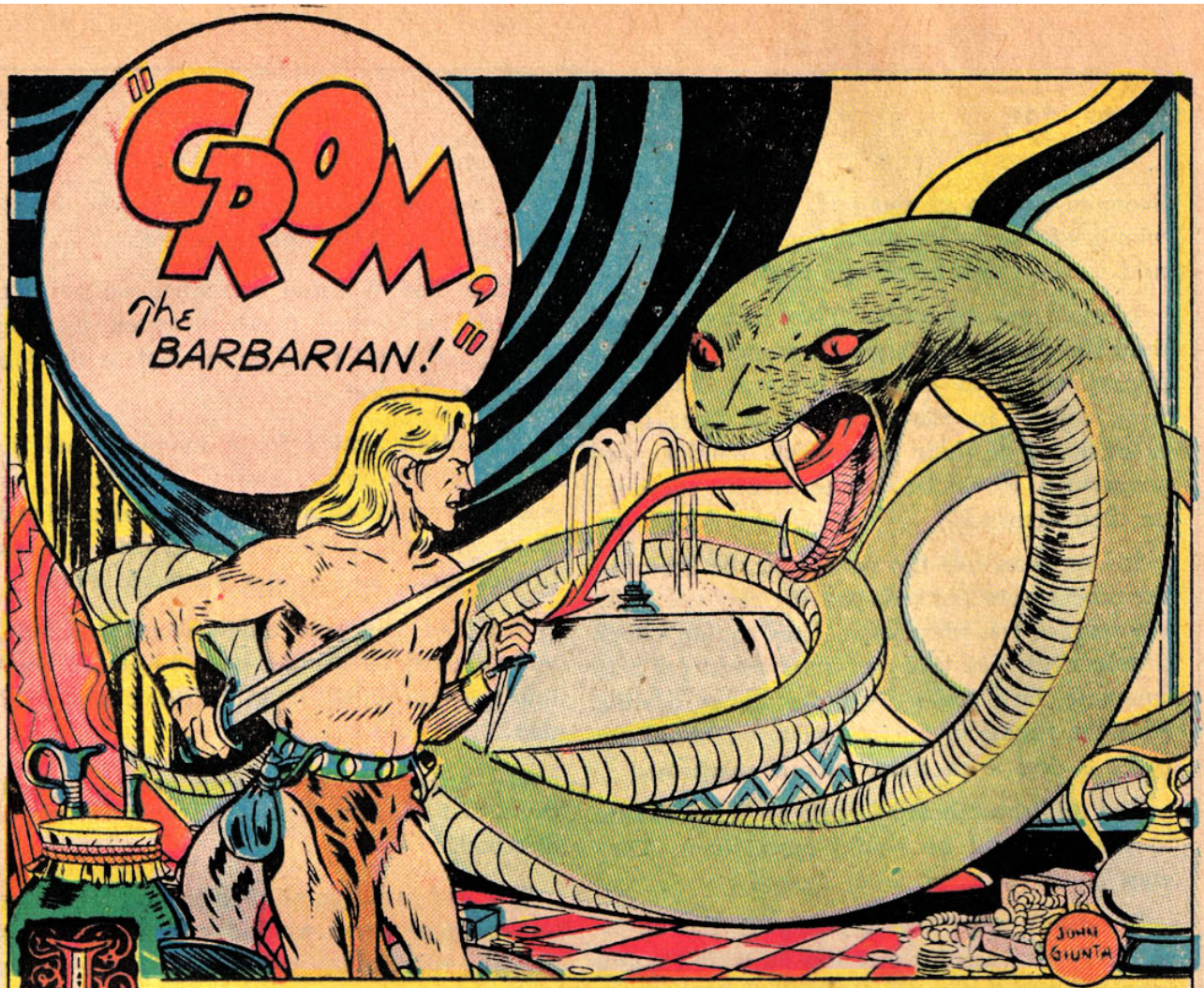
But Ted somehow didn't seem appalled at what looked to us like a cold-blooded act of murder—how could he kill his own fiancee like that?!

We dashed out of the ship, armed, and surrounded him. And then in a few words we understood.

Ted had saved us all. For he had recognized the robot plot and we had not. The thing we thought was Sandra was not her at all—it was a cunningly constructed robot—designed to look like Sandra and actually loaded with enough plutonium to blow our ship to smithereens. It was the intent of the robots to hand her over to is, to have Ted bring her aboard our ships under the impression it was Sandra, and there to blow ourselves up when the dummy detonated!

But how had Ted caught wise to all this? Simple, when you think of it, and a robot wouldn't think of it. They don't have to breathe, you know. It never occurred to them to put an air helmet on their dummy Sandra. But Ted knew that the real Sandra couldn't have survived out there in the airless surface of Pallas, couldn't have yelled as the phony Sandra did, couldn't have been so obviously active in the robot's clutches! So he destroyed them both.

How we rescued the real Sandra and the Pallas rebellion collapsed is a story you all know from your history books. But the story of Ted Winston's clever act of deduction is probably new to you.

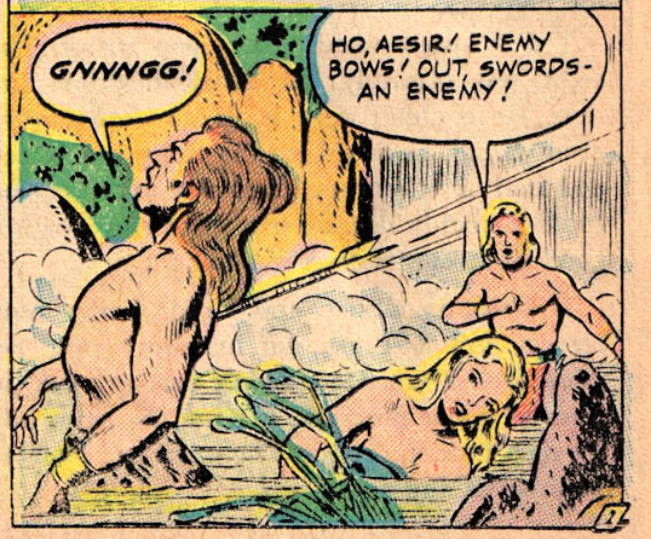


IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE EARTH, THERE WERE MANY STRANGE RACES AND TRIBES MOVING ACROSS THE LAND, MANY CITIES AND COUNTRIES NOW FORGOTTEN, UNRECORDED BY ANY HISTORY. OCCASIONALLY VAGUE LEGEND OR UNINTELLIGIBLE PARCHMENTS IN SOME TIBETAN LAMASERY GIVE A HINT. VESTIGES OF THEIR EXISTENCE STILL REMAIN AT EASTER ISLAND, IN THE DAMP JUNGLES OF BRAZIL, UNDER THE HOT SANDS OF THE SAHARA AND THE GOBI. FROM ONE OF THOSE LONG-LOST PARCHMENTS RECOVERED IN AN UNDERWATER UPHEAVAL, TRANSLATED BY A LINGUAL EXPERT, WE BRING YOU THIS TALE OF THE EARTH'S MORNING, A DAY BORN IN THE MISTS OF EARTH'S BEGINNING...

CROM WAS A BARBARIAN-A MAN BORN OF THE YELLOW-HAIRED AESIR WHO MIGRATED FROM ASIA INTO EUROPE, A MAN STRONG WITH MUSCLE, HIS BRAIN KEEN IN THOSE DAYS OF BRUTE-LIKE SUPERSTITION AND SAVAGERY. HIS SWORD WAS MADE OF IRON, AND HE LIVED AND SLEPT WITH IT ALWAYS AT HIS SIDE.

BUT CROM WAS TO BE SWEPT FROM THE CARAVANS OF HIS PEOPLE, AWAY FROM THE BIG VANS AND THE SHAGGY PONIES, INTO A WORLD WHERE GREED AND BLACK MAGIC HELD SWAY, WHERE ONLY HIS SWORD AND HIS WITS STOOD TO HELP HIM WHEN HE FACED THE HORRIBLE FATE OF...

AS THE WOODEN-WHEELED VANS OF THE AESIR STOPPED AT A MISTED WATERSIDE TO FRESHEN WARRIORS AND BEASTS ALIKE, A CYMRI BOWSTRING TWANGED...



TO CROM, ALL MEN WHO WERE NOT AESIR, WERE ENEMIES. THEY MUST BE KILLED, THAT HIS TRIBE MIGHT BECOME RICH AND PROSPEROUS...

CYMRI! MONKEY-PEOPLE! KILL-KILL!

WITH SHOUTS OF DELIGHT, SEEING BUT ONE YOUTH FACING THEM, THE CYMRI SPRANG FORWARD. BUT THEY HAD NEVER FACED A SWORD THAT WAS LIKE A DART OF LIGHT, IT MOVED SO SWIFTLY!

AIEEE! HE IS A DEVIL!

HIS SWORD IS NOT ONE- BUT MANY!

FROM THE BROAD VANS OF THE AESIR, THE YEW LONGBOWS WERE TWANGING. LONG SHAFTS HURTLED THROUGH THE AIR TO SPLIT THE SMALLER CYMRI BOWMEN...

HO! THEY REEL! THEY FALL BACK!

LOOK-A BOAT! THEY COME FOR CROM AND LALLA...

IN THEIR LITTLE BULLHIDE BOAT, THE CYMRI SWEPT THROUGH THE MISTS, HAIRY ARMS LIFTED CROM'S SISTER LALLA...

DOGS! YAPPING LITTLE CURS OF CYMRI! LET GO LALLA--

MY SWORD IS DRY! IT HAS LONG BEEN THIRSTY! DRINK DEEP, SKULL-CRACKER! DRINK YOUR FILL!

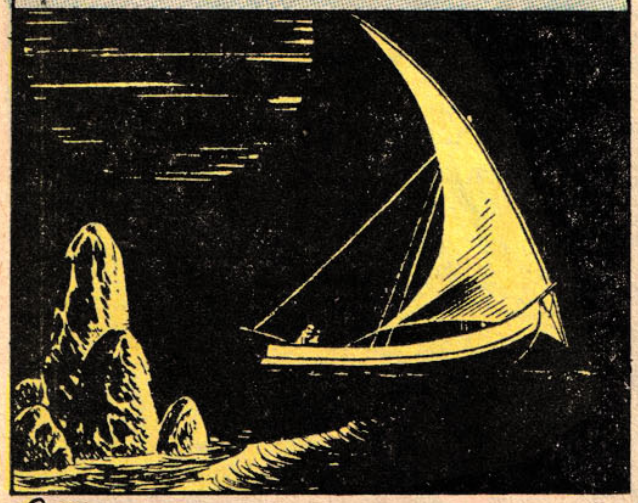
SLOWLY, INCH BY INCH, CROM FOUGHT HIS WAY TO A FOOTING IN THE BOAT. UNNOTICED, IT DRIFTED FARTHER AND FARTHER FROM SHORE, UNTIL IT FLOATED ALONE ON THE VAST SEA...

YIELD, YOU FOUL HOUNDS OF HEL! YIELD...

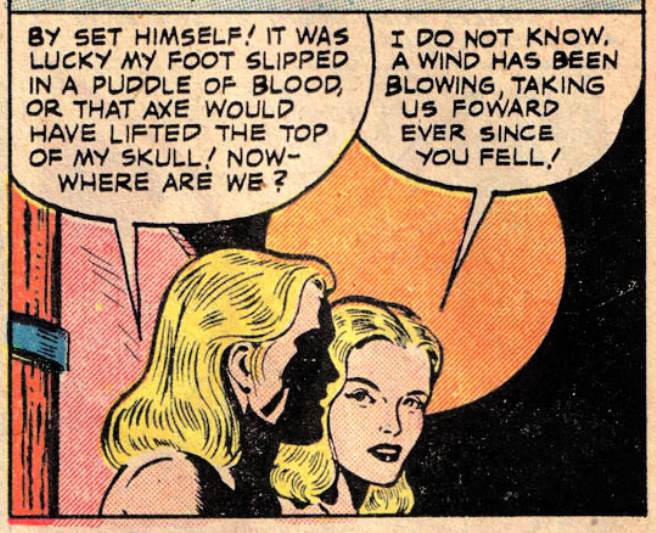
A SHRILL WAIL OF AGONY FROM THE LAST OF THE CYMRI... AN AXE-HEAD SLAMMING DOWN ON CROM...AND LALLA SCREAMED IN FEAR...

GODS BE MERCIFUL- CROM... CROM!

ONWARD DRIFTED THE BULLHIDE BOAT. A WIND SPRANG UP, CARRIED IT SWIFTLY THROUGH THE MISTS, WHILE A SOBBING GIRL LAY OVER A FALLEN CROM...



CROM STIRRED. HE SAT UP, A HAND TO HIS HEAD. A GRIN TWISTED HIS FACE... A SAVAGE, TRIUMPHANT GRIN!



FOR THREE DAYS THE LITTLE BOAT SPED WESTWARD BEFORE THE WIND. AND THEN, ON THE MORNING OF THE FOURTH DAY, THE MISTS CLEARED TO REVEAL A BLACK ISLAND, AND LOVELY WOMEN STANDING BEFORE IT...

TO CROM'S BARBARIC MIND THE OLD MAGICIAN MEANT ONLY ONE THING - TO TAKE CROM'S YOUNG, POWERFUL BODY FOR HIS OWN, BY SOME SORCEROUS MEANS...

THAT NIGHT BEFORE THE ROARING FIRE IN THE HEARTH OF HIS ANCIENT CASTLE, DWELF, THE MAGICIAN SPOKE EAGERLY TO CROM...

THE FOUNTAIN HAS BEEN THERE SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE EARTH, WHEN PEOPLE CAME FROM THE STARS TO BUILD IT. SOME DAY IT WILL BE LOST- BURIED UNDER WHAT MEN WILL CALL THE SAHARA DESERT- BUT NOW IT IS THERE- FOR ME!

THERE IS A GREAT TOWER IN THE CITY OF OPHIR THAT SHELTERS THE FOUNTAIN. THERE ARE GOLD AND JEWELS ALL ABOUT IT. TAKE ALL THE JEWELS AND GOLD YOU WANT. JUST BRING ME THE WATER OF YOUTH, IN THIS JUG YOU WILL BRING WITH YOU!

WITH A GROWL OF RAGE RUMBLING IN HIS MUSCLE-CORDED THROAT, CROM LEANED ACROSS THE BARE WOODEN TABLE. IN HIS HAND A DAGGER GLINTED RED IN THE FIRELIGHT...

IF YOU DO NOT AGREE- YOUR SISTER LALLA DIES BY TORTURE!

BY SET! THREATEN ME, WILL YOU, OLD MAN? I..

CROM THE BARBARIAN STAGGERED AS HIS EYES LOCKED WITH THE BURNING ORBS OF OLD DWELF! CROM DID NOT KNOW WHAT HYPNOTISM WAS- BUT IT STOPPED HIM- DROVE HIM BACK...

YOU...WILL.. ..DO..AS...I ..SAY..!

THOR SAVE ME! YOUR EYES... THEY BURN! I CANNOT MOVE..

IN A DAZE, CROM STAGGERED DOWN TO THE WATER'S EDGE AND CLAMBERED INTO THE BULLHIDE BOAT. MOMENTS LATER, IT WAS MOVING OUT TO SEA, TOWARD FABLED OPHIR...

HIS EYES! THEY KNOW SOME TRICK TO SAP A MAN'S WILL. WHEN I NEXT SEE DWELF, I SHALL NOT LOOK IN HIS EYES, BUT AT HIS NECK- AND AIM SKULL-CRACKER THERE!

OPHIR WAS THE RICHEST CITY ON THE SHORES OF THE INLAND SEA. ITS WOMEN WENT IN SILKS AND JEWELS. ITS MEN WORE MAIL FOXED IN SILVER, AND BORE SWORDS FITTED WITH GOLD. TOWARD OPHIR BY NIGHT CREPT CROM, SAVAGE EYES ALERT AND EAGER...

DWELF SAID THERE WAS A TOWER..A GREAT BLACK TOWER! THAT IS WHERE THE FOUNTAIN IS!

BUT WHEN HE FOUND THE TOWER, HIS HEART SANK WITHIN HIM IN AWE. HIS VOICE RASPED WITH ANNOYANCE- CROM KNEW NOT FEAR!

BY THE TEETH OF GARM THE HOUND- IT'S WELL GUARDED! IT WOULD TAKE AN ARMY TO STORM IT!

NEAR THE SQUARE OF THE TOWER STOOD A FLAT, LONG BUILDING. CROM STARED AT IT, HIS BRAIN BUSY. AND THEN, AS A PRETTY WATER-GIRL WALKED PAST, CROM CAUGHT HER WITH AN ARM...

WORKING SO LATE, MAIDEN? DON'T THE GIRLS OF OPHIR DANCE AND SING?

WHO HAS MONEY TO DANCE IN THE TAVERNS?

I HAVE MONEY! GOLDEN PITARS! BUT TELL ME... THAT BUILDING BEYOND US- WHAT IS IT?

THE CITY JAIL, STRANGER! BUT TALK NOT OF JAIL. THE NIGHT IS YOUNG, AND GWENNA IS THIRSTY...

THE CITY JAIL! I COULD ENTER THAT EASILY ENOUGH, BY THOR! FROM THERE TO THE TOWER.. BY A CORD... STRONG ENOUGH TO BEAR MY WEIGHT...

YOU ARE SILENT, STRANGER!

WITH A CARELESS LAUGH, CROM DREW THE GIRL TO HIM, BUT HIS BRAIN WAS SCHEMING EVEN AS HE PUT HIS LIPS TO HERS...

I WILL BE ARRESTED! THROWN INTO JAIL! BUT FIRST- THE CORD AND A FILE!

CROM USED A GOLDEN PITAR TO BUY THE CORD AND FILE. HE STRAPPED THEM ABOUT A LEG AND TWISTED A BANDAGE AROUND IT, TO HIDE THEM. AND THEN HE ROARED HIS GLEE, LIFTING GWENNA HIGH ON A SHOULDER...

I'LL FIGHT ANY MAN IN THE PLACE! ANY MAN AT ALL! COME ONE- COME ALL!

THE MEN OF OPHIR ROUSED UNDER HIS TAUNTS, THEY FLUNG THEMSELVES AT HIM. JOYOUSLY CROM LAUGHED, FOR THE LOVE OF FIGHTING FLOWED IN HIS VEINS...

WHAT A MAN! ZUES! HE'S MAD!

I'LL NOT HURT YOU! THERE...I'LL TAP WITH THE FLAT OF MY BLADE!

BUT WHEN THE CITY POLICE ARRIVED, CROM MEEKLY YIELDED, AND WALKED WITH THEM TOWARD THE JAIL...

I'LL BE OUT TOMORROW, WATER GIRL! TAKE THESE COINS UNTIL THEN...

But while the city of Ophir slept, Crom worked with his file at the old, worn bars of his cell...

A good long cord... with the file attached.. will reach the roof of the tower yonder...

Moments later, a file clanged on the stone ornaments of the black tower.. dragged...then held! And Crom swung out into the moonlight...

Freya guide me! May the cord hold my weight-

At that instant, Tanit, queen of Ophir, stirred from her couch and walked to the window of her bedroom...

Am I dreaming? Or is that a man swinging toward the black tower?

Like a weighted pendulum, Crom catapulted through the night!

The gods favor me! I'm going to get a handhold on the ornaments!

Foot by foot, Crom mounted the tower. As he put a hand on the edge of the roof and swung up, two black, snarling panthers launched themselves at him!

Set! They'll topple me back-off the tower-to fall and break my back!

But Crom was half animal himself! His great muscles tensed for the shock of their leap! His laughter rang loud in the night!

Ha! Come you black beauties! I've fought your kind before, in the jungles of Ind! Ha!

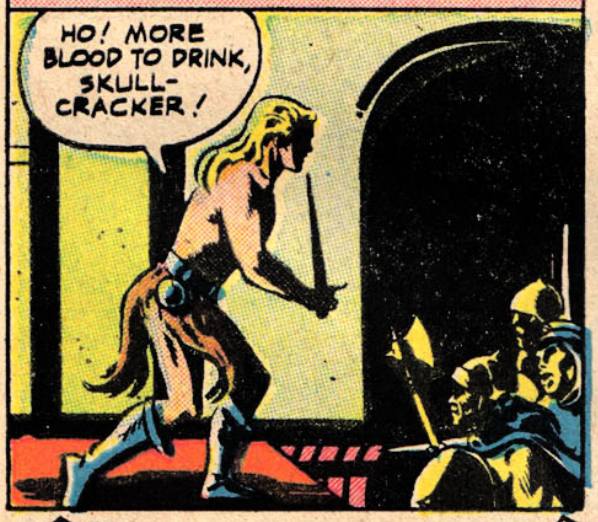
Snarls and growls rumbled from furry throats as man and beasts rolled across the tower roof. Claws and fangs sank deep. But Crom fought silently, cleverly...

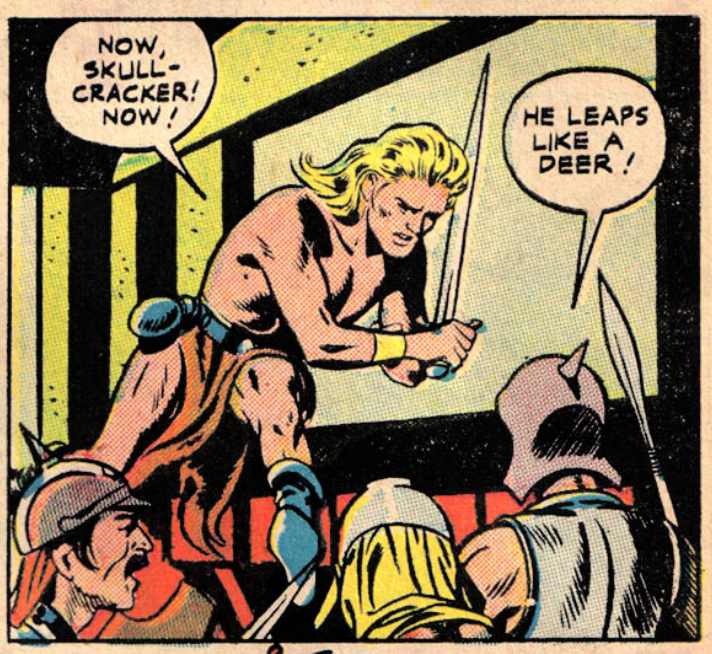
Got my dagger! Now I will return those scratches!

WHILE CROM FOUGHT FOR HIS LIFE ON THE TOWER ROOF, TANIT RACED BY AN UNDERGROUND PASSAGE INTO THE TOWER...

HIGH ABOVE, ON THE ROOF, CROM'S GREAT MUSCLES CREAKED WITH STRAIN! A PANTHER SCREAMED AS ITS BACK BROKE! ANOTHER GURGLED AS A DAGGER DRANK ITS LIFE-BLOOD!

DOWN A FLIGHT OF STAIRS CROM MOVED, AND THEN ALONG A CORRIDOR. SUDDENLY A DOOR CRASHED OPEN, AND PALACE GUARDS POURED OUT...





CROM'S GORILLA-LIKE STRENGTH, THE CUNNING OF HIS SWORD-HAND, SWEPT THE SOFT, POLITICALLY APPOINTED GUARDS BEFORE HIM. ONE OF THEM SCREAMED, TOO LATE TO CALL FOR HELP...

CHUCKLING HIS TRIUMPH, CROM WALKED FORWARD INTO THE CHAMBER OF THE FOUNTAIN...

AND THEN—A CRY BROKE FROM HIS LIPS! A CRY OF HORROR AND REPULSION! HIS EYES WIDENED IN REALIZATION THAT HE WAS DOOMED—BUT WITH AN OATH, HE DRAGGED SKULL-CRACKER FROM HIS SCABBARD!

WITH A SCRAPING OF HARD SCALES, WITH A HISS OF EXPELLED BREATH AND DARTING TONGUE, A MONSTROUS SNAKE-FROM WHICH THE LEGENDS OF THE VIKING EARTH-CIRCLING SNAKE HAS ARISEN-ROSE SLOWLY FROM ITS CIRCLED COILS ABOUT THE PLAYING FOUNTAIN. FLAT, BEADY EYES SOUGHT THE HUGE FORM OF THE BARBARIAN. ANGRILY THE MONSTER ROSE, HIGHER AND HIGHER...

WITH A HISS AND A LIGHTNING-LIKE DART OF ITS FLAT HEAD, THE MONSTER STRUCK...

BY THE ICE IN THE BEARD OF ULLER! THAT WAS-CLOSE!

HE RECOVERS SLOWLY! IF I CAN AVOID HIS NEXT LUNGE-THEN SPRING FORWARD-WHILE HE DRAWS BACK-

AGAIN THE SNACK-THING STRUCK! THIS TIME, CROM JUMPED HIGH ON STEEL-THEWED LEGS!

NOW-WHILE HE IS SLOW IN RECOVERING-I *MUST STRIKE!*

SKULL-CRACKER GLINTED RED IN THE TORCHLIGHT AS CROM SWUNG IT ONCE AROUND HIS HEAD, THEN BROUGHT IT DOWN...

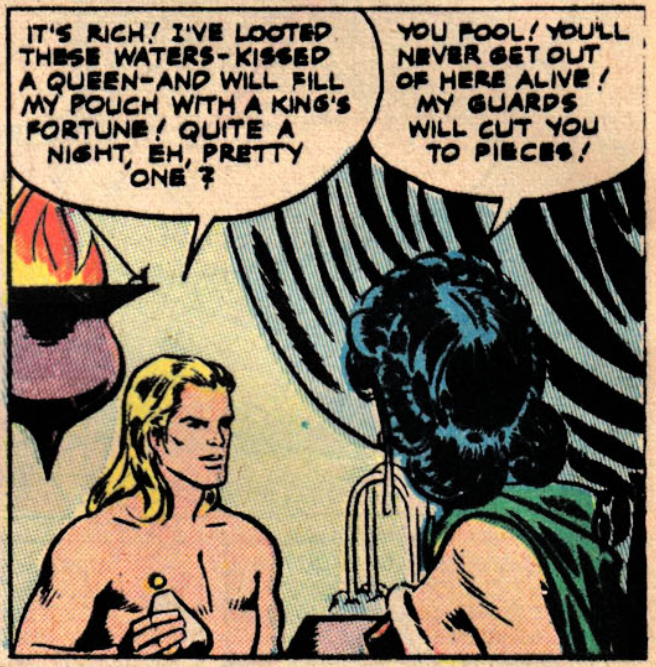
YOU DIE, MONSTER!

WITH A GRIN OF CONQUEST, CROM STEPPED FORWARD. BEHIND HIM, SLIM DAGGER UPLIFTED TO SPLIT HIS BACK, CAME TANIT, ON BARE FEET THAT MADE NO SOUND ON THE MARBLE FLOOR!

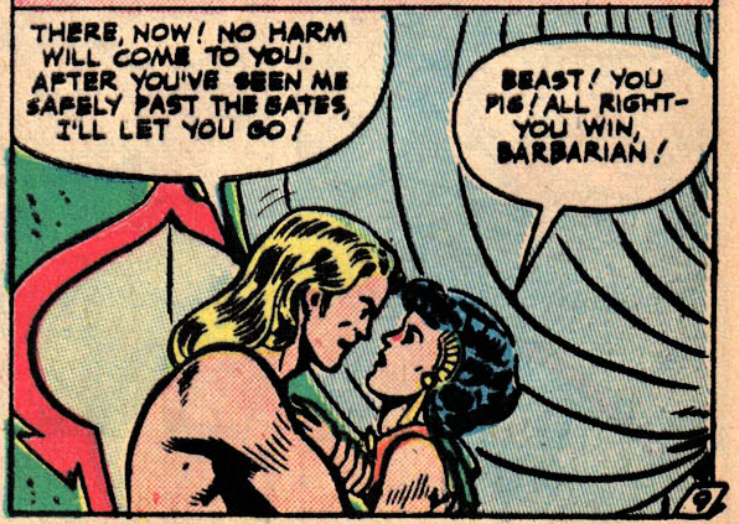
NOW FOR THE WATERS OF ETERNAL YOUTH!

BUT BEFORE TANIT COMPLETED THE DOWNWARD SWEEP OF HER SLIM BLADE, CROM HAD SEEN HER REFLECTION IN THE UPRAISED JUG...

CROM'S MIGHTY ARMS DRAGGED TANIT CLOSE AGAINST HIM AS HIS LIPS DRANK KISSES FROM HER RUBY LIPS... UNTIL SHE WENT LIMP AGAINST HIM, AND HE THRUST HER SAVAGELY AWAY...



PROUD TANIT WAS A QUEEN, BUT ALSO A WOMAN. SHE THRILLED TO THE SAVAGE STRENGTH OF CROM AS HE LIFTED HER HIGH IN HIS ARMS AND BEAT DOWN HER CLAWING FINGERS!



ON HORSES STOLEN FROM THE ROYAL STABLES, CROM AND TANIT THUNDERED ALONG THE MOON-DRENCHED COBBLESTONES OF ANCIENT OPHIR...

REMEMBER, QUEEN! ONE FALSE MOVE AND MY DAGGER KISSES YOU TO DEATH!

BEAST! I'LL REMEMBER!

YOUR RULER PASSES! THROW WIDE THE GATE. LET NO ONE FOLLOW!

IT SHALL BE DONE, MAJESTY!

AS DAWN TINTED THE WATERS OF THE INLAND SEA A BRILLIANT RED, CROM SWUNG TANIT FROM HER MOUNT. THE BULLHIDE BOAT SWUNG IDLY AT ITS MOORING AS CROM GRINNED AT THE PRETTY QUEEN...

OPHIR WILL BE A DULL PLACE NOW, TANIT—WITHOUT CROM!

TOO DULL FOR TANIT! TAKE ME WITH YOU, CROM! WHEN YOU ARE FREE OF YOUR QUEST—COME BACK WITH ME TO OPHIR! RULE WITH ME—AS IT'S KING AND—MINE!

DAYS LATER, THE BOAT BLEW IN TO THE ROCKY SHORE OF DWELF'S ISLAND. CROM AND TANIT JUMPED ASHORE, CAME TO STAND BEFORE THE OLD MAGICIAN...

GREAT CROM! CROM THE MIGHTY! THE SLAYER OF MEN AND THE LOVER OF WOMEN. SO YOU'VE WON YOURSELF A QUEEN AND A KINGDOM, HAVE YOU? TOO BAD—THAT YOU MUST DIE!

HELD POWERLESS BY THE HYPNOTIC EYES OF DWELF, CROM WATCHED HIM DRAIN THE JUG... BEGIN TO CHANGE SHAPE... GROW YOUNGER...THINNER...HIS HAIR REGAIN COLOR...AND AS HE CHANGED, SO DID HIS HYNOTIC GAZE...

SET SAVE US! HE GROWS YOUNGER ...YOUTHFUL! HE *IS* YOUNG!

RELEASED FROM THE SPELL OF THOSE GLINTING EYES, CROM SHOOK HIMSELF AS A GREAT CAT MIGHT, FROM A LONG SLEEP...

WHEN HE PUT US IN HIS SPELL, I COULD NOT WARN HIM! TOO MUCH OF THAT WATER WILL SEND HIM SO FAR BACK... HE WILL BE BABY NO LONGER...BUT—NOTHING AT ALL!

FOR A HORRIFIED INSTANT CROM STARED. THE BABY BECAME SMALLER... SMALLER...AND THEN—WAS GONE!

AND NOW, CROM.. NOW THAT YOU HAVE DONE ALL HE ASKED—WILL YOU RETURN WITH ME?

TO OPHIR? AYE! WHY NOT? TO RULE A KINGDOM! GODS, BUT IT'S A NEW KIND OF ADVENTURE FOR ME. LEAD ON, PRETTY ONE!

AND SO, WITH TANIT AND HIS SISTER LALLA, CROM SET FORTH FOR OPHIR, AND THE NEW ADVENTURES THAT WAITED HIM THERE. DO NOT MISS THE NEXT GRIPPING ADVENTURE OF CROM, THE BARBARIAN.

THE END

Hey Gang--Step Up To Home Plate--And "MAKE A HIT" With This SENSATIONAL NEW "Safe-At-Home" SHOW CASE and "PRIDE OF THE YANKEES" BASEBALL

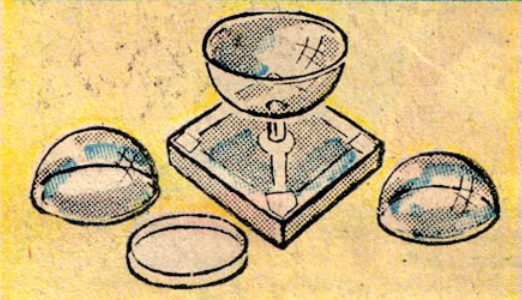
YOU'LL BE PROUD TO OWN THIS —

THE PRICE IS ONLY

CASE & BASEBALL ONLY $3.98

HERE IS SOMETHING EVERYONE OF YOU HAVE ALWAYS WANTED, BUT COULDN'T GET . . . A new, revolutionary SHOWCASE TO KEEP YOUR AUTOGRAPHED BASEBALL IN and IN ADDITION as an INTRODUCTORY OFFER, we are putting in a "SIGNATURE, PRIDE OF THE YANKEE—BASEBALL" . . . It's something entirely new, that will really make your friends sit up and take notice, and that will make you the envy of the neighborhood! The case is really something out of this world . . . made of clear, beautiful gleaming plastic, mounted on a green baseball "Diamond" . . . it will last and last . . . forever . . . and it will preserve the baseball forever! AND JUST LOOK AT THE LINEUP OF NAMES ON THE BALL: CASEY STENGEL, ED LOPAT, JO DI MAGGIO, JOHN LINDELL, CLARENCE MARSHALL, HANK BAUER, FRED SANFORD, LARRY BERRA TOMMIE HENDRICK, GEORGE STERNWEISS. PHIL RIZZUTO, CHARLIE KELLER, FRANK SHEA, JOE PAGE, GEORGE MARSHALL, TOMMY BYRNE, GENE WOODING, BOB PORTERFIELD, VIC RASCHI, CLIFF MAPES, BOBBY BROWN, ALLIE REYNOLDS, FRANK CROSETTI, PHIL JOHNSON, FRANK HILLER AND RALPH HAUCK!!! MAN O MAN . . . WHAT A LINE UP! DON'T WASTE ANY TIME, ORDER YOURS TODAY!

SHOWCASE with SIGNATURE BASEBALL - Complete Outfit above right, only $3.98



SHOW CASE ALONE $1.98

IF YOU ARE ONE OF THE THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE WHO ALREADY OWN AN AUTOGRAPHED BASEBALL and you want someplace, something, to keep it in, and to show it to friends, why just order the showcase alone. THE GLEAMING PLASTIC, IS CRYSTAL CLEAR, IT PERMITS YOU TO KEEP THE BALL ON display at all times, without getting it dirty, or wearing the name off . . . THIS SHOWCASE IS REALLY A HUMDINGER, SO DON'T WASTE ANY TIME GETTING PROTECTION FOR YOUR AUTOGRAPHED BALL, PROTECTION THAT WILL PERMIT YOU TO PRESERVE THE BALL AND TO DISPLAY IT PERMANENTLY ORDER IT NOW!

SHOWCASE ALONE - FOR AUTOGRAPHED BALL YOU OWN - IS ONLY - $1.98

BASEBALL ONLY . . . IF YOU JUST WANT one of the PRIDE OF THE YANKEES BASEBALLS ALONE WE'LL SEND YOU THAT TOO . . . OR IF YOU WOULD PREFER A BASEBALL WITH ANOTHER TEAMS NAMES ON IT . . . ANY MAJOR LEAGUE TEAM . . . WE'LL SEND THAT TO YOU TOO . . . JUST FILL IN THE COUPON AND BE SURE TO SPECIFY WHICH TEAMS BALL YOU WANT . . . (ONLY THE MAJOR LEAGUE TEAMS BALLS AVAILABLE) RUSH YOUR ORDER AT ONCE . . . WE ARE GOING TO BE SWAMPED WITH ORDERS AND WE WANT YOU TO HAVE YOURS SOON!!

BASEBALL $1.98

GUARANTEED NO RISK OFFER

YOU can try this offer for 10 days at no risk to you. If you are not satisfied after you receive the case or ball, return it to us in 10 days time and we will send your money back . . . you can't strike out on this deal, but don't get stuck at base . . . FOR FAST ACTION, CLIP AND MAIL COUPON NOW — — —

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GENTLEMEN: PLEASE RUSH THE FOLLOWING TO ME AT ONCE:

- ☐ PRIDE OF THE YANKEES SHOWCASE & BASEBALL..@ only $3.98 each
- ☐ SHOWCASE ONLY (I HAVE BALL).....@ only $1.98 each
- ☐ PRIDE OF THE YANKEES BASEBALL ONLY.....@ only $1.98 each
- ☐ SHOWCASE & BASEBALL.....@ only $3.98 each
  INSERT MAJOR LEAGUE TEAM YOU WANT.....
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☐ SHIP C.O.D. FOR SALE PRICE AND FEW CENTS POSTAGE CHARGES.
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THIS IS ONE OF THE MOST SENSATIONAL OFFERS WE HAVE EVER MADE . . . WE KNOW THAT THERE ARE THOUSANDS AND THOUSANDS OF FANS THAT HAVE ALWAYS WANTED A PERMANENT AND EFFECTIVE DISPLAY AND PROTECTIVE "AUTOGRAPH BALL SHOWCASE" AND SIGNATURE BSEBALLS . . . WELL HERE IS YOUR CHANCE TO HAVE YOUR VERY OWN ONE. AND WE ARE SO SURE THAT YOU WILL BE DELIGHTED AND THRILLED WITH IT THAT WE OFFER IT TO YOU ON A MONEY BACK GUARANTEE THAT PROTECTS YOU IF YOU ARE NOT SATISFIED . . . YOU CAN RETURN IT TO US WITHIN 10 DAYS AND GET YOUR MONEY BACK . . . WE GUARANTEE YOUR SATISFACTION!

The Shipwrecked BOGEY MAN

There really was a big green bogey man in Peter's bedroom . . . and nobody would take any notice. So how could you expect a little boy like Peter to keep the monster from making unearthly atomic machines from the toys in the closet?

By Lloyd Williams

MOTHER'S VOICE was savage. "Now I don't want to hear one more peep from you tonight!" And she snapped off the light and slammed the door behind her.

For a minute Peter dared not stir in the bed. She had waited outside the door to listen. Then, "Remember, now!" she called, and he heard her go down the hall.

He looked over in the corner. You could see the Bogey Man now, he shone green in the darkness. The

luminous green body uncoiled and faced outward from the wall, hands away from eyes, and stared down at the scattered pieces of Meccano.

Peter was suddenly frightened. "It wasn't me, I didn't do it" he called. The big green-and-yellow eyes turned toward him. "No!" he whispered, "It wasn't me. . . ."

No sounds came from downstairs. Dad wasn't home yet, and Mother must be reading. If only Jimmy were around! But Jimmy was away at boarding school and his room next door was empty.

The Bogey Man looked at him, and he could not call out.

Then the eyes turned away, the body crouched on the floor, and he heard the pieces of his toy builders' set being gathered together. He moved his head over to the side of the bed and watched. *Click-click,* green hands picked up the metal rods and fastened them in place. He heard the screw-driver at work, and saw only vague movement in the darkened room. *Click-click!* How can he see, Peter wondered. The big eyes turned toward him again and he felt drowsy. He wanted to move, to ask questions, but he was dead tired, too sleepy. . . .

In the morning, first thing, Peter ran to his toy cupboard. Yes, there was the Meccano, packed away on the first shelf. He took out the box and opened it. All the pieces were in place, each group tied in the right tray. It was just like the other mornings, there was nothing to see. Why doesn't he leave me something built, thought Peter. And as he shut the cupboard door he looked into the shadowed corner.

At breakfast Dad made fun of him. "Well, me lad," he said, "I understand you have a visitor."

"I do!" said Peter. "Mother doesn't believe me but I do."

"He's all green and can't be seen," said Dad, and chuckled.

Peter felt muddled and lonely. "He doesn't like the light and you can only see him in the dark," he said.

"Naturally! He's transparent but slightly fluorescent."

"Now Ralph," said Mother, "That's no way to talk. You mustn't encourage Peter to go on. The main thing is—"

"Really! After all, I didn't invent this monster, Sylvia."

"The main thing is to stop Peter from walking around and playing when he should be in bed. You must talk to him seriously, Ralph!"

"Now look here," said Dad, "I was not here when it started, was I?"

"No. Of course you weren't! You never are when anything difficult comes up. Always off on a trip." Mother stood up. "The whole load falls on me. Oh, I'm so tired of it all."

"Wait, Sylvia." Dad got up, too. "Forget what I said. I know it's hard for you. . . ." As she left the room he called, "I'll get to the bottom of this and fix it up, do you hear?"

Peter started to eat his egg hurriedly.

Dad looked at him sternly. "Fun's fun," he said, "But Mother tells me you're out of bed every night now, playing with your toys instead of sleeping."

"It's not me," he wanted to say, but Dad cut in, "And there's no use blaming it all on this little green man. Look, my boy, you're too old for things like this. You must stop being a baby and think of your mother."

"Aw gee, Dad!" said Peter. "It's the truth. Honest. I'll show you if—"

"No! . . . Stop that! You get off to school now, but tonight we're going to have a serious talk about this."

"Please, Dad. It'll only take a minute. Come upstairs and I'll show you. Honest!"

But when he opened the cupboard door Dad didn't look quickly enough.

Peter glanced up and saw that he had failed. "Don't you see the green?" he asked, "Look!" And he swung the door to and fro, three times in succession.

Dad straightened up. "You go to school," he said, "I'll see you tonight."

It was no use.

That night he was sent to bed early, and the light bulb was removed from its socket. "My flashlight," he suggested, and they took it away too.

"You can't do much fooling around now," said Dad.

So he lay in bed and waited while the room grew darker and the house became quiet. His eyes were fastened on where the toy cupboard rested against the wall. He heard a scraping noise. Something moved in the cupboard. There was a snap—the little door opened, and the green, froglike man was crouched down and backing onto the floor.

The Bogey Man carried something out with him—the builders' set—and put it down. He opened it, and turned towards Peter. The big eyes looked at Peter for a long time, a long, long time. . . .

WHEN he examined the cupboard next day, Jimmy's chemistry set was lying on top of his own Meccano box. And packed neatly away behind were some of Dad's tools—he saw the soldering iron—and what looked like pieces from the radio. Peter grew frightened. "No," he whispered. "You shouldn't do that. I'll get in trouble." He reached in for Jimmy's box and then drew back. The Bogey Man mightn't like it.

He was halfway downstairs, badly worried, when Dad's shout came.

"What the devil's wrong with this damn thing!"

"What do you mean, Ralph?" called Mother.

"The radio, dammit all! That's what I mean! What happened to it?"

He waited there as Mother ran out from the kitchen. Dad was moving the radio around and grumbling.

"Why there's a tube missing!" shouted Dad. "That little devil. . . ."

Peter ran back upstairs and went quickly to the cupboard. Now he was in for it! Jimmy's box, the tools, the mass of wires—he piled them together and gathered them up in his arms. What about the radio thing? Too late—they knew about that. He took the rest and hid them under the bed in Jimmy's room. Now Dad was shouting something at the foot of the stairs and Mother was talking low, pleading. He ran back for the Meccano box, emptied all the pieces from it under Jimmy's bed, and put the box in his own cupboard again. He threw the radio tube on his floor and started down for breakfast.

Dad was coming up the stairs. He went past Peter into the room and picked up the tube. "Well!" he said. "Just as I thought. Don't think that's at all funny, Peter."

And later, as he got up from the breakfast table, Dad said, "Hold on, my boy. I'm going to put an end to your playing around in the middle of the night. It's got to stop. . . . Understand?"

Peter was silent.

"Tonight you sleep locked in your room. We're taking all your things out from there, d'you hear?"

"Yes, sir," said Peter.

"All right. Away you go."

When he came in from school that afternoon his room looked bare. His comb and toothbrush were left on the dresser, the towel still hung over the radiator. Everything else was gone. He looked in the games cupboard. All his stuff had been removed, even his skates and helmet, and of course the box of Meccano. But far at the back, as he closed the door, there seemed to be a flicker of green.

Peter rushed down the hall into Jimmy's room and looked under the bed. He sighed with relief—they were just as he'd left them.

Nobody was around. It took him two trips to carry everything away, and he hid the lot underneath some things in his clothes closet. When it was done he felt safe for the first time that day.

Dad took a last look around, everywhere, before he locked Peter in at bedtime. "Understand now, Peter," he said, "I'm going to be listening tonight. I don't want to spank you, but I will if you make me."

"Yes, Dad."

"Nighty-night, old boy."

"'Night, Dad."

Then the key turned and he was alone.

PETER didn't go to sleep. He waited until the house was quiet and then, as silently as possible, climbed out of bed. It was awful, leaving behind the protection of his covers, but he had to do it. He felt naked and defenseless as he crossed the room, and the squeaking of the closet door scared him terribly. All the same, he did what he must—uncovered the pile of things hidden beneath the clothes and carried it all out onto the floor.

There! The whole lot was all right. As he handled things he checked in his mind. The chemistry set, tools, building pieces, wires—everything! His worries were over, he could go back to bed.

He took one step and then froze in sudden terror.

The radio piece!

He'd forgotten the tube!

Coldness crept over Peter and he began to shake. He couldn't move, couldn't think. Realization of failure made him sick, and he didn't know what to do.

It was all so stupid. He'd meant to take Jimmy's radio, the one Jimmy wasn't allowed at school, and which was in the dresser drawer in the next room. Nobody would have known. He'd planned to bring it in with the rest of the stuff.

And he'd forgotten.

Peter went over to the door and tried it. No use, it *was* locked. There was no way out. He'd have to stay and wait for—

He grabbed the handle and shook hard. The door rattled. He couldn't stay in here! Not without a radio tube. A coldness came all over his skin and he got set to shout.

Dad would kill him if he shouted. It would be terrible. He remembered Dad's face in the morning.

With a moan of fear Peter slipped to his knees at the door. He couldn't do anything. Not a thing.

Snap!

Horrified, he looked behind him. Yes, it was the cupboard door. The Bogey Man! He tried to take his eyes away, and couldn't. He couldn't move. He crouched there and watched the gleaming body back out of the cupboard.

Over to the pile on the floor went the green figure. It bent down and for some minutes examined the things Peter had placed there. The luminous fingers turned over piece after piece, and all the while Peter waited in terror for the discovery.

Impatiently the Bogey Man scattered the pile about the floor. The figure came erect, glanced again at the objects around its feet, and then Peter saw the huge glowing eyes turn full upon himself. Now, he thought—Now!

Time stopped. Nothing happened. Then, slowly, with no noise, the Bogey Man moved toward him. The green-and-yellow eyes came closer, became immense in size—they filled Peter's world. And without knowing why, or even when it had happened,

Peter found himself without fear. The green man was beside him, those eyes were on a level with his own, and there was no menace, no suggestion of danger. He watched one glimmering hand reach past him, saw the little piece of metal pushed into the lock of the door—then there was a *click,* and he knew the door could be opened.

When he went to get Jimmy's radio the little man crouched in a corner with eyes averted from the hall light. Silently Peter returned with his burden, shut the door, and climbed back into bed. Inside, he felt relief and pride—he was all right now, and he had done well.

AS HE LAY there a sense of intimacy with the Bogey Man grew in his mind. He watched the green body crouched on the floor, hands moving busily, and the room seemed a warm and friendly place. Thoughts drifted into his mind—he, too, seemed to be out on the floor, working with feverish haste. Before him the apparatus grew. . . . Fit this bar here, across the frame. Fine! Now the fields interlock at the point, so the next conductor. . . . A-ah. There also must the crystal be mounted, or so it seemed, and he glanced aside at the bath in which it was growing.

It made no sense to him, and yet it did. Words and pictures were in his mind. They were unfamiliar, totally so, yet for an instant they meant something. It was the ship, of course. Or a sort of a ship, you might even call it an escalator. That was what the apparatus was for.

Lucky the chemicals were available for that crystal bath. That's the way it went, though, you expected that. And just for luck—in case things went wrong and you had a shipwreck—why you carried a seed crystal with you. They were unobtainable except. . . .

Peter understood about the wreck. The Bogey Man didn't *want* to be here. It was an accident, or maybe an enemy at home. Anyhow . . . now the multiplier. Not the same tube as last night, this one would do though. Hook it into the field-guide framework and test for gravitational direction. . . .

There!

He watched while the horn-shaped crystal was lifted from the bath and measured. Good enough—just two adjustments to make in the circuit constants and perhaps. . . . Wait! One last check over the whole setup. . . .

Peter's head was down on the pillow. It was almost morning, his whole body was desperately tired, but he *must* stay awake—just a little longer.

Everything was ready now. Soon it would be good-bye. Peter fought his body into sitting position. A friend was going away, beyond his reach forever, and he wanted to watch. He must see it all, the whole thing, and hug it in his memory.

The green hand slipped a plug into the wall outlet, and all eyes in the room turned toward the apparatus. They waited anxiously. . . . It *should* work.

Down the hall a door opened. There was the sound of feet, and Peter tensed. What was Dad doing?

The green figure stood erect, motionless. Only the one, shuffling noise could be heard. Closer, closer. . . . Then Peter relaxed. The bathroom, Dad was going there.

Outside there was a jarring noise, a glass smashed on the floor, and he could hear Dad's low, grumbling tones. Stubbed his toe, thought Peter, and he was filled with relief. They were still all right, nobody would come in.

A new yellowish glow caught his eye and he looked back to the center of the room. Exultation arose in him

(Continued on page 110)

Terror of the Mist-Maidens

By A. Bertram Chandler

HE SAT ALONE at his table, alone and lonely, and his thoughts and memories drifted, drifted, long ago and far away. His lips twisted in a wry grin as he lifted his goblet of wine. The touch of the vessel was cold to the skin of his fingers—and yet, he

On that faraway planet, women were fighting a life-and-death struggle against the enticing femininity of the fog-creatures—and only one man knew how to end that incredible warfare.

noted almost unconsciously, there were no beads of condensation upon the smooth surface of the glass. It offended his sense of the fitness of things. This minor irritation served to drag his mind away from the irrevocable past, back to the things in the here and now.

He looked around him, trying to find something of glamor in his surroundings, something of interest, something to shake him out of the black mood into which he had fallen. But this was, he thought, the drabbest world to which he had ever come in all his long career as an interstellar navigator. The drabbest world, and the drabbest people. Outside—the mud, and the low, unlovely buildings, and the eternal mists that forever drenched this small, unimportant planet and forever hid from view its dim, ruddy sun. And inside—a reaction from the all-pervading humidity.

The Martian Room they called it, this place in which he was spending this evening of his shore leave. The Martian Room—and in all probability he, alone of all those present, was the only one who had ever visited that planet. But the name *Mars* was a part of the language of Man no matter where he might be, no matter upon which of the Man-colonized worlds in even the remotest sectors of the Galaxy he might be living. For Mars had been the first world other than his own to hear the thunder of his rockets, had been the first world outside of Earth on which he had lived, and died—and been born. Tenacious is the memory of the race, and long the memory of those early struggles before ever the interstellar drive had been conceived. And so it is that in the language of Man, anywhere, the word Mars has become synonymous with dryness.

Save for the fact that he would have required neither furs nor respirator, a Martian colonist could have found no fault with this Martian Room. The air was dry, dry, with an aridity that tickled the skin and rasped the throat. The walls were cunning three dimensional murals of desert, and flimsy, attenuated cacti, and low red sandstone cliffs. Overhead a white, shrunken Sun, together with a few of the brighter stars, blazed in an almost indigo sky.

And the music was dry, arid, a dead rustle of strings and a brittle rattling of drums. The dancer on the little stage had consummate skill, had grace of a sort. But she was—or so thought Pierre Leclerc—no more than a sere, withered leaf drifting aimlessly before the wind, before the Autumn wind, down-whirling into drab and dusty oblivion.

Leclerc shuddered, looked away from the stage. He thought almost longingly of his cosy cabin aboard *Pegasus,* of the warm wardroom, of the pleasant company of his shipmates who had been too lazy, or too wise, to brave the damp misery of the night for the sake of such dubious, over-priced pleasures as this unimportant city of an unimportant planet had to offer. Leclerc sipped his wine, shrugged his shoulders almost imperceptibly. He knew that the mood which was robbing his evening of enjoyment would have done so anywhere, in almost any company.

And there was no company here that would, or could, interest him. His uniform—that of an officer of one of the rare interstellar ships—had attracted attention, would have served as sufficient introduction at any of the other tables. But he had already rejected overtures of friendship, had refused invitations to join parties. The men in the place were a pallid, bloodless lot, withered almost, deadly drab. *They must,* thought Leclerc, smiling faintly at the conceit, *breathe through silica gel filters. . . .*

The women would have been—possible. But there was something blatant about them, some hint of a desperate hunger, that repelled him. He was very much of the cat this night—Kipling's cat that walked by its wild lone through the wild, wet woods. He sat by himself, small, dark and self-sufficient, cloaked with an arrogance, a prickly inviolability, that hid a nameless, indefinable need.

LECLERC looked away from the stage, looked towards the door. Something, not quite presentiment, not quite hope, had told him that, just possibly, somebody of importance might be coming in. He distrusted the extra-sensory warning, sneered at himself for heeding it, yet looked. And the attendant at the door, uniformed in a flimsy imitation of Martian furs and breathing mask, flung it open.

The woman entered first, and, a pace or so behind her, the two men. She was tall, this woman, and silver-blonde, and she carried herself like a queen. The face was too strong for conventional prettiness, and the mouth too wide, the cheekbones too prominent. The skin of her shoulders was in dazzling, creamy contrast to the black gown that did little to hide the well rounded, graceful strength of her figure.

The two men, also, were in black, but their clothing, although absolutely plain, had all the severity of a uniform. And they were armed; from belted holsters protruded the butts of some kind of hand weapon. They walked warily, but with something of the arrogance of the professional bully. Their pale eyes shifted continually in their pale, hard faces and their hands never strayed far from the pistol grips of their weapons.

An obsequious waiter fluttered before the woman, led her to a vacant table not far from Leclerc's. She said, "Yes, this will do," and sank into the chair that had been pulled out for her. Her voice was cold, and clear, and gave the impression of perfect control. The two men—bodyguards?—took stations behind her chair. One of them glared at Leclerc, who realized that he must have been taking an unmannerly interest.

But he wasn't the only one. The music was still playing, the dancer was still jerkily posturing on the little stage, but all the little background noises of the place, the tinkle of glasses, the low murmur of conversation, the occasional shuffle of feet, had died. There was a tension in the air, a hushed expectancy, and. . . .

The darkness came with the impact of a physical blow. It came with the vicious crackle of hand weapons, was broken, briefly and terrifyingly, by livid stabs and bursts of flame. There was the crashing of overturned tables and chairs, there were shouts and screams. Somebody was trapped among the percussion instruments of the orchestra, and the wild clashing of cymbals matched and augmented the growing panic.

There was the smell of ozone.

There was the smell of burning.

And there was another smell, dank, dead yet alive, sickly sweet.

Somebody found the light switch. The glare of the concealed lights, of the imitation Sun in the high ceiling, was dazzling, painful. It showed confusion, terror, smashed glassware, overturned furniture, frightened people cowering behind the pitifully inadequate cover of chairs and tables. It showed charred, still smouldering scars on floor and walls and ceiling.

Leclerc got unsteadily to his feet. The shooting seemed to be over—and, it seemed, those who had been doing the shooting would never shoot again. The two men in black were sprawled upon the floor, motionless. Their still-smoking blasters were grasped in

their hands, but those hands looked, somehow, very dead. Leclerc was curious. And he wondered, too, where the woman was. She had not looked the type to bolt for cover as soon as trouble started. And she had not looked the type to desert her friends, or servants, whatever they had been.

He went down on his knees beside the nearest of the two bodyguards, turned the body over from a prone to a supine position. It was limp in his hands, cold. The face was unmarked, but the man had died in a spasm of pain and fear that had contorted the features into a terrifying mask.

The spaceman shuddered, turned away from the unpleasant sight. He found himself looking at the polished surface of the table at which the woman had been sitting. It was misted faintly with some dampness that was fast vanishing in the dry air. And scrawled in the mistiness were words, fading fast, but still barely legible.

"Follow," he read. "Mount Tannenburg. . . ."

And that was all.

And then the police arrived and took charge.

LECLERC stood in the muddy road outside Police Headquarters. It was dark, and the street lamps were mere, diffuse blurs of light, confusing rather than aiding vision. The air was full of the not unmusical sound of water trickling from roofs and walls, along the deep gutters on either side of the roadway. A helicopter threshed overhead, flying low, audible but invisible.

The navigator thought of walking to the nearest automatic beacon and calling an air taxi to take him back to the spaceport, to his ship, but it was only a half-hearted desire and it took no great effort of will for him to overcome it.

His mood, in the main, was one of indignation. He had been ready, as a matter of course, to help the local police force in their investigation of the murders and the kidnaping, but he had first been treated as a suspect and then snubbed, insulted.

So, he thought bitterly, *I am to mind my own business. I am to go back to my ship and stay there. I am to take orders from a fat, hick policeman.* . . . He grinned. *If he'd had the manners to provide me with transport back to the ship I might have gone. . . . Now. . . .*

His grin faded. What, he wondered, was he to do? What could he do?

A figure loomed out of the fog, stopped before him. From beneath a weatherproof cowl peered a woman's face. The woman said, "It is you. The little officer from the interstellar ship. I hoped I would find you here."

Leclerc bowed.

"You have found me, Mademoiselle," he agreed amiably. "What now?"

"Just this. What did Alina write on the table?"

"I would suggest that you call in there," he gestured towards the dimly lighted doorway from which he had come, "to enquire."

"You know, or should know, how much use that would be. But others in the Martian Room saw writing on that table, although you were the only one close enough to read it before it faded. They saw you read it. What was it?"

Leclerc countered with another question.

"Have you a Spurling?" he asked. "Or any kind of flying machine, with maps and instruments? It is too late to think of hiring one at this time of night, even if I had the necessary money on me for the deposit. . . ."

"You didn't answer my question."

"Lend me something that flies, and I will."

The woman smiled. In the dim light Leclerc saw that it was a hard

smile, and reckless, yet not unattractive. And her voice, when she replied, had softened. She said:

"I can see that you want to help Alina. Very well, you shall. But you must let me know what it was that she wrote."

"I will, when I'm sure that you're on the same side as I, as she. I feel that the message that she left was for me, and that I should be letting her down if I passed it on to the wrong people. I feel, somehow, that I have done so already. Those policemen—I did not trust them. . . ."

"How right you were. But—what was the message?"

"I told you my terms."

"Very well."

She raised her right hand. Leclerc, fearing a weapon, jumped back, but it was only a small silver whistle that she held, that she brought to her lips. Hardly had its thin, sweet blast sounded than a dozen forms materialized out of the mist, rushed in upon him from all sides. He tried to fight, but when his first blow landed he automatically checked himself. His reason told him that this was one of the occasions when it would be in order to strike a woman, but by the time that his natural chivalry saw sense it was too late for him to do anything about it. His captors, all women, hustled him away from the dangerous vicinity of Police Headquarters, down a side turning. There was something standing there, something huge and dim with great, spreading vanes. He was pushed into the cabin, shoved on to a seat with three of the women piled on top of him. Under its whirling vanes the 'copter lifted.

"All right, girls," said the pilot, "let him up now. But keep him covered."

Leclerc, disheveled and embarrassed, levered himself to a sitting position. He looked into the pilot's cabin, saw by the dim light from instruments and radar screen that the woman who had met him outside Police Headquarters was at the controls. Her face was serious, grim. She turned to face him and said, "I'm sorry, but there's no time to lose. Really, there's not. You must believe me."

"Where are you going now?"

"To the airport. I—we—have a Spurling there. After that, you give the orders."

"Mount Tannenburg," said Leclerc suddenly.

"All of five thousand miles," said the woman. "We must hurry." Then, "She should have told us, but she liked playing a lone hand. And she should have known that those two pet gorillas of hers were no protection."

THERE was surprisingly little delay at the airport. There were, of course, the inevitable forms to fill in, the inevitable questions to answer. But the sleepy officials on duty seemed to see nothing strange in a visiting spaceman being dragged off on an aerial sightseeing trip by his hostesses. Nor, in fact, was there. Leclerc had known parties with much wilder aftermaths.

The Spurling rose vertically on its turret drive, then leveled off. The lights below them faded fast into the mists. There was mist above them, all around them. The woman—the boss woman was how Leclerc was thinking of her—busied herself at the controls, setting the course for Mount Tannenburg. Then, with the automatic pilot functioning sweetly, she came aft into the main cabin. She said, "My name is Marilyn Hall."

"And mine," said Leclerc, "is Leclerc, Pierre Leclerc. . . ." He slightly accented the given name.

"These five others, Leclerc," said Marilyn, "are Peters, Magrath, Fan-

tozzi, Andrevitch and Connor. . . ."

The spaceman bowed to the women, thinking that Marilyn Hall might have told him their names more fully. Not that it mattered. At a time like this social niceties were unimportant. He concentrated his attention on Marilyn Hall, rather liking what he saw. She was a redhead, with good teeth, an almost translucent skin and a sprinkling of freckles. Her figure was good, and her dress was not trying very hard to conceal the fact.

He said, "Now, what cooks?"

"It's not too long a story, Leclerc, and we'll have time to tell it properly. These ladies here, and myself, and, of course, Alina Rae, are members of a more or less secret society. Alina was our president. We haven't bothered with any fancy names. We've had our passwords, of course, we've had to have them. We've had to work underground. And the only men who have, officially, known of our existence have been those two bodyguards of Alina's.

"But I may as well start at the beginning. This world, as you probably know, has been colonized for about two hundred years. When we came here it was, to all intents and purposes, just a dead ball of inorganic matter revolving around its primary. And yet conditions were suitable for life as we know it. So plant and animal life were imported together with the first human colonists.

"It isn't—wasn't—a bad world. You, I know, wouldn't think much of it, ever. But it's what we're used to. We were happy here. Until. . . ."

HER face clouded. Leclerc watched her hands, her fists clenching and unclenching. He wondered what it was that she hated so. The viciousness in her last few sentences had rather shocked him.

"I was to be married," she said. "Oh, he was nothing wonderful. Just a Junior Meteorologist in the Weather Bureau. But we were rather badly in love. You know what it's like, or don't you? You make plans for the future, either absurdly ambitious ones or very sensible, strictly down-to-earth ones. But, whichever way, it's fun. And you get to the stage where conversation isn't really necessary and some kind of limited telepathy comes into operation, and it's all a matter of feeling rather than speaking and hearing. . . .

"Then, quite suddenly, he changed. It was hard to define, that change, but that beautiful sense of oneness was gone. And I sensed that he was giving me his time, his precious time, more out of loyalty than because of love. He just wasn't interested any longer. And yet, try as I might, I couldn't discover any rival. Not any human rival.

"I suppose that between me and—whatever it was he must have been in a little, private hell of his own. And perhaps I helped to stoke the fires up a little. Anyhow, one fine morning he stepped over the parapet of the Met. Bureau observation tower, and that was that.

"I—oh, skip it. It doesn't matter. But I began to find that I wasn't the only one who'd been through that particular mill. There's Alina Rae—her husband's still alive, still around, but he wants nothing of her. There are our friends here, and all the other women, some in our organization, some not. But we—those of us who organized—have been investigating. And we've found. . . . We've found. . . . How can I tell you? You'll think us mad

"Leclerc, you've traveled. You've been everywhere. Can there be such a thing as an intelligent gas—and could it take the form of a woman? A desirable woman?"

"I don't know. I've never heard of it, but that need not mean that there's

no such thing. There are the gaseous entities of Fomalhaut VIII, and they have sexes, of a sort. But it seems to be a matter of electrical attraction and repulsion so far as the scientists can make out. Some of the entities carry a negative charge, and some a positive. There's some kind of union, with thunder and lightning—oh, it's all very much according to the handbooks of physics. But it seems to work at least as well as our way of doing things does."

"So it is—possible. Now, this is what we know. One of our members walked out on her husband. She walked out, but she left something behind in the apartment. A concealed camera, set to start up as soon as her husband came in that night. The film, at first, was boring, just a man alone in the house, doing all the silly things that men do when they're alone. And then he did something exceptionally silly. He opened the window, sat down by the open window in his easy chair.

"The fog came in, of course, and something more than the fog. It was a dim, shimmering shape—it could have been roughly human in form, but that isn't important. It seemed, according to the film, to have its own luminosity. But I wish that we could have seen it as *he* seemed to be seeing it. I wish that any of us could bring such a look to a man's face. It settled around him, that cloud of gas or whatever it was, as he sat in his chair. And that was all there was to it. After a while it went, and left him sleeping.

"That was just the beginning. But, with that as a guide, we found out that these . . . mist people, or whatever they are, were responsible for all of our miseries. Once a man has known them he forgets us. No, not forgets, perhaps, but his attitude is—how shall I put it?—one of contemptuous toleration. Nothing that we can do—and you should know how much a woman can do—will ever change it. And even when the men realize their . . . guilt, the power of these living mists is enough to stifle any impulse they may have towards faithfulness or decency.

"Well, we worked. It was dull work, checking and rechecking, following every conceivable lead. We had to find out where these things came from. And we had, too, to maintain secrecy, for we could no longer trust any of the men of this world.

"You haven't been here long enough to feel the dreadful atmosphere of sex antagonism, of fear and hostility, yet I assure you that it is very real. It is a poison that is making our lives a misery. It is a poison that will mean the end of the race on this planet and on other worlds if it spreads. You haven't been infected yet. You, with your experience, might be able to help us. . . ."

"I will," promised Leclerc. "To the best of my ability. But your leader, Alina? What had she found?"

"We know now. She had discovered where these . . . *things* come from. And that knowledge must be important, otherwise she would never have been taken as she was. There had been attempts before at killing her, but they had been made by men, if you could call them men, by poor crazed creatures completely dominated by the evil thing from Tannenburg. Two of them we handed over to the authorities, and we don't know what happened to them. The third one we questioned ourselves. He was stubborn. And he . . . died. . . "

Leclerc shivered a little. He felt that this was a war in which any person of sense would remain neutral. He knew women—and, knowing them, was inclined, in his heart of hearts, to fear them. The old poet who had made the crack about the female of the species being deadlier than the male had been right.

FORWARD, in the pilot's cabin, a buzzer started to sound. Marilyn Hall stiffened abruptly, then hurried to her controls. Leclerc went with her. One radar screen showed the territory over which they were flying, lakes and forests and, at wide intervals, the geometric regularities of towns. Other screens covered the ship's surroundings in the vertical plane. And it was on one of these screens that a speck of light was steadily expanding.

"Right astern," whispered the girl. "Fifty miles and coming up fast!"

"Can we get any more speed out of this crate?" asked Leclerc.

"No. And that'll be a police ship after us, and nothing on this world can outrun them. . . ."

The wail of a siren burst from the Spurling's receiver, swelled, filled the cabin with panic inducing waves of sound. It ceased abruptly, and then a clipped, official sounding voice said, "Calling ship ZX509. Calling ship ZX509. Heave to. Heave to at once. Marilyn Hall and Pierre Leclerc, Navigator of the interstellar ship *Pegasus*, wanted for questioning!"

Leclerc went to the microphone. He said slowly, "Leclerc here. I question your jurisdiction over an Officer of the Federation. . . ."

The speaker laughed nastily. Leclerc could picture the fat police official with whom he had already had dealings chuckling over his microphone. The tinny voice said, "I pack my jurisdiction in six launching tubes. We'll stand for no nonsense. Are you heaving to?"

"No!" declared Leclerc. Then, over his shoulder to the girl, "How far?"

"Thirty miles. Still outside the range of their weapons."

"And about nine hours flying time still to Tannenburg?"

"Correct."

"So. . . ."

"So we have no intention of being blasted out of the sky, Leclerc, but we have every intention of getting to Tannenburg. Better hold on. I'm going upstairs!"

The man staggered as the Spurling's nose lifted sharply. He clutched the back of the pilot's seat, yet still had difficulty in maintaining his balance. Then, with dazzling abruptness, it was light. The ship had burst from the eternal mists, into the thin air above the everlasting overcast. Astern of them the ruddy sun was lifting over a vast, unbroken sea of red-tinged cloud. He looked aft. A long way away, still slightly below them, was something from which the sun's almost level rays were reflected in silver fire.

Still the Spurling climbed. And it seemed to Leclerc that the police ship was lagging, was losing altitude. It puzzled him.

Marilyn Hall, sensing his bewilderment, laughed. "This ship," she said, "belongs to Fantozzi here. Her husband is rich—too much money. And, frankly, our Lisa is a little bit of a snob. No locally made plane was good enough for her. She had to have an imported model. And the most expensive imported models are those from Castor IV. What do you know of Castor IV?"

Leclerc thought, hard. He tried to remember his one visit to that world, many years ago. He succeeded in recalling to his mind's eye a vision of barren, desolate rocks, relieved here and there by the glittering, crystalline domes of the human cities. He saw the black sky, the intolerably bright sun, the unwinking stars. He said, slowly and doubtfully, "No surface atmosphere . . . no use for regular planes. . . ."

"And rocket drive for above-surface transport. The Castorians have modified the hull design of their export model Spurlings, but not the drive. Our Police Department sticks

to locally manufactured ships and ram jets. Given an atmosphere in which to work their athodyds are fast, fast. But we have the heels of them now."

"They've given up," called one of the women.

"No," said Marilyn. "They'll be waiting for us at Mount Tannenburg."

THEY were waiting at Mount Tannenburg. The police ship that had chased them was there, and half a dozen others. One hovered on its turret drive directly above the twenty thousand foot peak, the others maintained a constant patrol over the surrounding terrain. Marilyn Hall picked them up on her screens when she was still outside the maximum range of any of their weapons. She sat over her controls, frowning.

Leclerc, in the co-pilot's chair, looked at her worried face, asked himself what she was going to do, what she could do. And it wasn't as though they knew where to go, what to look for. A message scrawled on a misted table top carried compulsion and conviction when it was first read, but it had told almost nothing.

This Mount Tannenburg was too big, the area covered by it far too vast. The very peak, perhaps, was what had been meant? But this much was certain, there could be no false choices. Once landing had been effected the police ships would be down on them like starving vultures on carrion. Provided, that is, that they weren't shot to pieces on their way to a landing. . . .

Leclerc stared at the radar screen covering the surface below them. He noticed that one little spot on the western slopes of the mountain glowed more brightly than anything around it, stood out like a spark of pallid fire in the green-glowing fluorescence. He said, a little doubtfully, "Metal. . . ."

"So what?" snapped the woman.

"I do not know," said Leclerc slowly, "if the famous female intuition is working or not, but mine is. It seems to me that one would hardly find such a large concentration of pure metal in nature. Its existence bespeaks the artifact, and an artifact means intelligent beings. These shimmering ghosts of yours are, one supposes, intelligent in their way. We will look for them there."

"Are you sure, Leclerc?"

"No. But I am sure that by hanging here we're becoming a temptation to anybody with a large stock of guided missiles at his disposal. Take her down. But fast. Then. . . ."

"All right. But I'm not landing her. We'll tumble out as fast as we can and then one of you, you'll do, Fantozzi, she's your ship, take her and carry on down the mountain, as though you're looking for something. And once the shooting starts getting serious, ditch her and get the hell out!"

The Spurling's nose dipped. The screaming jets in their turret turned through an arc of ninety degrees, the glimmering speck shifted from the horizontal screen to the one covering the forward vertical plane. The cloud surface came up to meet them like a solid wall—and the sun went out like a snuffed candle as they plunged into the mists.

The cabin, which had been almost freezing, became uncomfortably warm. There was the thin, high whistle of tortured atmosphere screaming past and over burnished hull and polished wing surfaces. And there was a great flare in the fog, and a deafening concussion, as the first of the police rockets burst below and to port of them.

By a miracle no damage was done. Down they plunged, and down, pressed back in their seats against the force of gravity. Then Marilyn

cut the drive, brought the jets round in their turret to check the mad descent. They blasted out again, and the shock burst safety straps and sent cabin furniture crashing away from its fastenings. The ship leveled off, hovering very perilously on her flaming jets.

Marilyn Hall jumped up from the pilot's chair, ran to the door. Leclerc, following, saw the woman called Lisa Fantozzi hastily taking her leader's place.

He jumped, fell to a rough sloping surface, rolled until he was brought up short by some kind of prickly bush. He heard the noise of the jets rise in pitch to an angry scream that sounded almost like that of a living thing, looked around in time to see their ruddy flare fast fading into the fog. There was a muffled explosion in the direction in which the Spurling had vanished, but the noise of her drive was not cut short, diminished slowly with increasing distance.

"Leclerc!" somebody was calling. "Leclerc!"

"Here!" he shouted. "Here, Marilyn!"

"We'll come to you. Are you all here?"

One by one, the girls called their names.

"Where's Helen?"

There was a short silence, then somebody said, "I . . . I think she fell under the jets. . . ."

Leclerc felt more than a little sick, but pulled himself together. This was no time for sentimentality. If women chose to play a dangerous game. . . .

MARILYN HALL loomed out of the fog, her arms outstretched. He took one of her hands. It was warm, and firm, an anchor to reality. Then two more women appeared, one of them limping badly. "Janet!" called Marilyn sharply. "Where are you? We're waiting!"

The reply drifted out of the gray formlessness around them, thin, frightened.

"I can't—move—The mists—stopping me. . . ."

Leclerc swore. He started to run in the direction of the voice, dragging Marilyn with him. He tripped and stumbled on the uneven ground but somehow kept his feet.

There were no words now coming out of the fog as a guide, no articulate words, just a high, dreadfully thin whimpering. And then he saw the girl. She was standing erect, trying to ward something off with ineffectual hands, and around her swirled a shimmering, silvery vapor. Formless it was, amorphous, yet suggestive in its convolutions, hinting at impossibly perfect curves. . . .

And he felt sudden desire, hot, aching desire—and he felt too that the air was charged with hate, the dreadful, implacable hate of sexual rivalry. And the knowledge of hatred slipped into the back of his mind, and there was only naked desire. . . .

Almost he forgot that here was a woman, one of his own species, in some unspeakably horrible peril. Almost. . . . But with an effort that left him weak and shaken he fought down the imaginings that had come all unbidden to his mind, fought down the urges that strove to inhibit the action his cold intellect demanded.

But he was too late. The solid, flesh and blood woman glimmered and faded, glimmered and faded, and she was gone, and he never knew if the silvery tinkling of laughter came from inside or outside his own brain, the laughter, and the sweet, high woman's voice saying, "She is one of us, now. . . . And you—will be ours."

And desire came again, and in the shimmering mist, clothed in shimmering mist, was the woman Alina, as he had seen her before, as he had seen her on the night of her vanishing, the

same, yet not the same. Her arms were outstretched, and her lips were slightly parted, and her smile could have been sad, but it was sweet, sweet. . . . And there was fulfilment there, and peace, and all that a man wants and all that can never be given in its entirety by any living woman. . . .

He started forward. He pushed, without comprehension, at the barrier that was holding him from the consummation of his desires. He felt a mouth on his, warm, urgent. He felt a firm body against his own. But the kiss was not what he wanted, not that kiss. He fought against it. But this strange desire was even stronger than his own desire, and it was familiar, and against his will, mind and body, he started to slip down what was, to him, a well-worn path.

And the shimmering mist was just —a strange, shimmering mist, and he was looking into the eyes of Marilyn Hall who was standing pressed against him, her arms around him, and on either side he was encircled by the arms of the other two women.

"A *man*," said Marilyn bitterly. "I thought that you. . . ." She left the sentence unfinished. . . .

The mists swirled and advanced, hemming them in.

"Fight," muttered the woman. "Fight, damn you! The three of us together might hold it off. And you, Leclerc, no more treachery!"

Again the air crackled with hostility, with bitter, naked hate. The tension rose to a pitch so unbearable that Leclerc wanted only to get away, to run somewhere and hide, to leave these rival manifestations of the female principle to fight it out without his aid or intervention, either one way or the other.

His reason told him that the human, flesh and blood women were right, that they were all the things for which Man has worked and fought and died throughout the long, long ages of his history, home and family and continuity. . . . And, he couldn't help thinking, his chains.

But they stumbled on, and before them, through the fog, loomed a high wall of metal. It was a ship, he realized dimly, but her plates were crumpled and torn, the double hull pierced in a score of places by the rocks on to which she had crashed. And she was old, old, and must have been here since before the first colonization.

Interest conquered emotion and he raised his eyes to read the worn, tarnished letters of the name, but this, *Helen,* told him nothing except that she was from long, long before his time, from the days when those who christened ships had drawn heavily upon Greek mythology.

"It is in here," said Marilyn.

"What is?" asked the man.

"I don't . . . know. But I feel, somehow, that the answer is here. . . . And keep close to him, you two. Don't let him away! And keep on fighting!"

THICK and thicker swirled the mists, solid almost, yet always receding before the implacable hatred of the three slowly advancing women. Leclerc deliberately shut his eyes, and the images, the shapes of aching, unfulfilled desire, were gone, but in his ears still sounded the voices, and every word was a caress and a promise, and he hated the women who were holding him captive in the drab, gray world that they alone would rule.

Into the ship they went, stumbling over broken plating, their uncertain way lit by a pocket torch that one of the three had produced. They ignored the tattered, formless heaps that had once been bodies, pressed on through riven bulkheads and over dangerously sharp-edged wreckage. At last they came to the Control Room and could go no further.

There was all manner of debris at their feet, and there was a book, and the torch was shining full upon it. By some freak the lettering on its cover was still legible. "Log of the Interstellar Ship *Helen*. . . ." read the girl with the torch slowly. "From—from Fomalhaut VIII to Sol III. . . ."

"So!" In spite of himself Leclerc was excited. His intellect was functioning once more, and taking a keen delight in the way that the pieces of the puzzle were falling into place. "You remember, Marilyn, what I told you on the way here? About the gaseous entities of Fomalhaut VIII? I begin to understand!"

The mists swirled about them, viciously hostile, and their hostility was no longer only for the women but also for the man who was now their ally. Leclerc stiffened, joined the driving force of his hate to that of the others, and hated himself for ever having fallen under the unholy spell of these creatures of fog and raw desire. He cried:

"There is more here, in this ship! More, much more, that they do not wish us to find! And we will find it!"

"Where?" gasped Marilyn.

"Try aft, the cargo spaces!"

And they fought their way through the broken ship, meeting hate with hate, weakening all the time before the intensity of the raw emotion that swirled about them, that broke against them like the waves of some incredibly storm-tormented sea.

They were weak when they found the cylinders, weak and streaming with perspiration. They stared at the two cylinders with dim, unseeing eyes. There was something they had to do, and they did not know what it was, and almost they did not care. They sat there, huddled together upon a ruined bale, weakly fighting back the forces that strove to overwhelm them.

But still fighting.

"We," gasped Marilyn, "will keep them off. Somehow. You, Leclerc, see what is to be done. . . ."

Secure, but how long? Within the circle of the arms of the three women Leclerc looked at the seemingly innocent metal containers. One was marked with the symbol of Mars, the symbol that has also a biological significance. The other was marked with the Crux Ansata, for Venus. . . . And that one was open.

It was Nature herself who had opened it. It was the steady dripping of water through a gap in the torn hull plating, for all of two centuries, that had eroded the tough steel. Leclerc shuddered, picturing the hungry entity—or entities—that had emerged, picturing the nature of that hunger, and the way in which it had been satisfied. . . .

He thought of man-eating tigers back on Earth, and the legend saying that once the carnivores had tasted human meat they would touch no other. . . .

But whatever was in the unbroken cylinder had never tasted human flesh. . . .

He whispered, "You'll have to let me go. I have to break the other cylinder. . . ."

SLOWLY, reluctantly, the women's arms fell from him. He picked up a short bar of metal from among the wreckage, raised it to attack the sealed valve, the valve that he could never open otherwise without the proper tools. And the mists surged in to the attack, and, for him, they had abandoned the weapon of hate, and it was the woman Alina who was standing before him, and her eyes were pleading and sorrowful, and her smile was tremulous. . . .

"Don't," she was saying. "It will be murder and worse. . . . And I am human. . . . I *was* human, and now I can give you more than ever woman

could. . . ." Her voice trailed off.

He hated the three who still sat on the ruined bale—the three coarse, silly women with their ridiculously strained faces, their evil desire to kill something so much finer than themselves. He knew that there was only one thing to do. He raised the bar again, but this time it was not the gas cylinder that he was going to attack.

Unafraid, even smiling, Marilyn got to her feet. Before he could bring the bar crashing down upon her coppery hair her arms were around him. "My dear," she said, "this is reality, here in my arms. . . ." And it was reality, of a sort, and he despised himself for accepting it as such even while all his body recognized and acknowledged the urgency of hers.

"Take the bar," he gasped, "smash the cylinder!"

"No. You must, my darling. *You must!*"

And the naked triumph in that last sentence was shocking, obscene.

With a strangled sob Leclerc pushed himself out of Marilyn's arms. The glimmering wraith that was Alina stood before the cylinder, all sweet allure, all that any woman could ever be to any man—and more. But the bar drove down through the living mist, and with the first blow the valve cracked open. With explosive violence what was inside rushed out—a shimmering vapor, a cloud of glittering particles, dreadfully alive and urgent.

And of that union Leclerc remembers little, neither Leclerc nor any of the three human women. There was lightning that flared and crackled all around them, there was the thunder that brought the searching police ships down upon them at last. It was a miracle that they survived, but survive they did, seared and shaken in the fused and twisted wreckage of the ruined ship.

It was Marilyn Hall who went to meet the policemen.

She held herself erect, arrogantly, stood on the hillside and let the men come to her. They stumbled up over the rough ground, through the fog that no longer swirled, living and shimmering, that was now dead, gray, and utterly formless.

"You are too late!" she cried.

"Too late?" echoed one of the men. "What . . .?"

"Yes!" she shouted triumphantly, "too late to stop one silly cloud of gas from being annihilated by another, even sillier! *Fools!*"

Leclerc came out from the wreckage, pushed past the contemptuous, blatantly exultant woman. He grabbed one of the policemen by the arm. He said, "Get us out of here. Get us back to the city. I can't stand any more."

Marilyn came and stood beside him, took his arm possessively. "Yes," she said. "There is no more danger. Take us back."

Nobody questioned her right to give orders. Leclerc felt sorry for the men of this world. For generations they would pay for the wrong that they had done the women, and for generations the women would crack the whip. He was very glad that he did not have to stay here, and hoped with all his heart that he would never come here again.

It was here that he had been faced with the choice between shadow and substance, and—

"Either way," he whispered to himself, "I was doing the wrong thing."

Marilyn dropped his arm, and between them was a taut, injured silence. He knew that once the police plane should have carried them to the city he would never see her again.

And he was not sorry.

The Discord Makers

Are there interplanetary invaders among us today? That's the question the G-Man wanted to investigate . . . but the trail was to lead to an undreamed of complication and an altogether unexpected conclusion.

By Mack Reynolds

HARVEY TODD, Director of the Department of Security, initialed two papers, put them aside and reached for another report. He didn't bother to look up. "Wish you'd make this brief as possible, Ross. I'm up to my ears."

"Chief," Ross Wooley said hesitantly, "suppose I wanted to investigate something on my own, follow up a hunch?"

His superior shot a quizzical look at the undersized agent. "What d'ya have in mind?"

"It's something screwy," the other answered, "something that'll sound like I'm around the corner."

Harvey Todd put down his pen and grinned at his best operative. "You must have a lulu this time, Ross, but your reputation's good and your hunches've been so far. What is it?"

Wooley scratched his chin with a thumbnail. "Chief," he said slowly, not sure how his words would be received, "I've got reasons to suspect there might be aliens in the United States."

The Department of Security head scowled at him. "Of course there're aliens here. What of it? That's not our jurisdiction."

"I mean aliens from space, some other planet, maybe."

"Are you drunk?"

"No, sir."

Harvey Todd stared at him for a long time without saying anything. Finally he muttered, "Let's hear it."

"I'd like permission to investigate. If I can't have it, I'd like leave of absence to probe around on my own. If I can't have that, I'll submit my resignation so that I'll be free to look into this as a private citizen." The little agent's eyes blinked rapidly behind his shell-rimmed glasses.

Todd glanced down at the pile of letters on his desk and sighed. He brushed them aside, reached into a drawer of his desk and brought out a prehistoric briar and a can of tobacco. He didn't speak again until the pipe was filled and lit and he was leaning back in his chair, puffing at it. Then he said, "This seems to mean quite a bit to you. What d'ya have?"

The agent stirred uncomfortably. "Not enough to make sense, chief. An article here, a news item there, some quotations from obscure scientists; more hunch than anything else. What I'd like is enough time to make a preliminary investigation. If I get anything definite, I'll report. Then it's up to you."

Harvey Todd let smoke trickle through his nostrils and squinted worriedly through it. "Give me more than that, Ross. I can't assign an agent to go around searching for

"The proof, Mr. Wooley? Take the flying saucers. . . ."

characters out of Buck Rogers without having some idea of what he's working on."

"You said my reputation was good," Wooley reminded him.

Todd picked up his pen and doodled a series of cubes on a pad before him. "It's bad for the department to be held up to ridicule, Ross. We've been under fire several times this past year. I can think of several congressmen who'd like to know we assign agents to tail men from Mars."

"Then you'd prefer my resignation?" the dynamic little agent's voice was tight.

His chief grunted disgustedly, then suddenly made up his mind. "No, damn it! Make your investigation. But, for heaven's sake, keep it quiet. If it gets into the papers, I'll have you counting your toes on Alcatraz before I'm through with you, Ross."

Ross Wooley grinned. "Thanks. Er . . . I'll have to do some traveling."

"See Smith about it on your way out. Now beat it. I think you're crazy." Harvey Todd took up his pen and another stack of letters, sighed, and went back to work.

A MAID ushered him into the study. He gave the room a quick once over and gained an impression of endless shelves of books, several comfortable chairs, good lighting, two well-conceived oils on the walls, a small portable bar. A scholar's room, but at the same time, a man's.

Professor Andre Dumar looked up from his chair with a frown, then squinted at the card in his hand again. "Mr. Ross Wooley?"

"That's right." The agent turned

and looked at the maid. She left the room, closing the heavy door behind her.

"Sit down, Mr. Wooley," the professor said. "You don't look the way Hollywood leads us to believe a Security agent does."

Ross Wooley didn't smile. He'd heard the equivalent too often before. "My strong point as an operative, Professor."

Dumar said, "About thirty years ago, while I was still an undergraduate, I recall writing a paper for my anthropology class entitled, 'Primitive Communism Among the Amerindians.' Otherwise, I can't think of anything in my life that would call for a visit from a Department of Security man."

Wooley grinned and selected a chair. "I came for information, Professor. You seem to be an authority on several obscure subjects; sort of an *off trail* specialist."

"That sounds as though it needs amplification."

"You confine your research to subjects many men of science, fearing ridicule, deliberately avoid. Mental telepathy and clairvoyance, for instance; you were a pioneer in their early study."

The professor nodded. "Actually out of my line, but a fascinating investigation. Now the ice is broken, more capable specialists than I are doing yeoman work in ESP."

Ross Wooley ran his left hand nervously over his chin. "Before we go further, Professor, I'd like you to understand that no matter how strange the things I ask you, the department requests that you not discuss them, even with family members."

Professor Dumar scowled and studied Ross Wooley's card again. "This says you're a government agent. Prove it, please."

Wooley smiled. "A sensible precaution, sir." He drew his wallet from his pocket and held it over for the other's inspection.

The professor went over the credentials carefully, then picked up the telephone and dialed the operator. "Give me the Department of Security, please. . . . Hello. This is Professor Andre Dumar. Here in my study is a man claiming to be Ross Wooley. Have you an agent of that name? . . . Thank you. Will you now describe him? Thank you, very much. Goodbye."

The professor returned the wallet and relaxed in his chair. "You seem to be what you claim. What are your questions?"

Ross Wooley framed the first carefully. "Professor, is there life in the universe besides that found on earth?"

Dumar removed his pince nez glasses and stared. "Life?"

"Yes. Alien life."

The scientist considered for a moment, then said slowly, "We are quite positive that at least vegetation exists on Mars, but it's unlikely any of the other planets have life forms."

"How about other star systems?"

"Of course, the authorities differ considerably. . . ."

"I'm asking *your* opinion, Professor," Wooley said.

The other shifted in his chair, as though the agent's questions irritated him. "Given the multitude of stars in our universe, it is likely that the conditions applying in our solar system, are duplicated elsewhere. In such case, I should say that life is probably also duplicated."

"Intelligent life?" Wooley pursued.

"—Possibly."

"Now this is the important question, Professor. Granting that life does exist elsewhere, could representatives of it have made their way to earth?"

Professor Dumar flicked a fingernail against the gold rim of his glasses. "Who informed you of my research into this subject?" he snapped.

Pay dirt, the agent breathed. Then, even more earnestly, "Nobody, Professor. It was a strike in the dark. Please tell me what you can."

Dumar got to his feet and went over to his portable bar. "Drink?" he asked over his shoulder.

"No, thanks." This was the first break in the investigation. The little agent was stimulated enough without alcohol.

"If you don't mind, I'll have one." The professor mixed himself whiskey and water and returned to his chair. He took half of the drink down in a gulp, then launched into his subject.

"I BECAME aware about three years ago that there were unnatural life forms on earth. They had seemingly been here for a lengthy period, but, nevertheless, something was wrong about them. My first clue was the fact that they seemed to revolt other animals, including man."

Wooley injected. "How do you mean, *revolt?*"

The professor ran a hand through his hair in irritation, as though it were difficult to explain. "Take the spider, for instance, or the snake; there's an instinctive loathing that nine out of ten persons feel at the sight of either. I believe it's because we know they don't *belong*. They're alien to earth, and, subconsciously, we realize it and our flesh crawls. To this list you might also add the rat and the cockroach."

Ross Wooley scratched his chin with a thumbnail. "I've always thought the fear of the snake and spider was instinctive, handed down from primitive man. They're poisonous, after all."

The professor shook his head. "That doesn't answer it. For one thing, few snakes and fewer spiders are poisonous. For another, it's more than just fear—it's absolute revulsion we feel. Besides, predatory animals killed more of primitive man than did the snake or spider. Why don't we feel this instinctive fear when we see lions, bears, or wolves? In addition, you'll find we have somewhat the same loathing, though not so strong for some reason, of rats and cockroaches, though they aren't poisonous."

The agent grimaced. "But how did they get here? Surely, you don't suggest that snakes, or spiders, or even rats, have the ability to construct spaceships."

"Frankly, that's been the greatest obstacle to my theory. I have two possible answers; neither quite satisfies me."

"Do you mind explaining them?"

"One possibility is that a spaceship arrived here a considerable time ago and crashed. The alien life forms it carried were forced to remain. However, the conditions on Terra were different from those on their home planet and they weren't completely successful in adapting themselves. They degenerated until now they are on a par with unintelligent life forms."

Ross Wooley was unsatisfied. "What led you to that theory?"

"For one thing, I note indications that the rat once held a higher stage on the scale of evolution. You'll find that the rat sometimes decorates its nest with broken pieces of colored glass or shiny bits of metal. Could it have the remnants of an esthetic sense?"

"Or the beginning of one?" Wooley suggested.

"Possibly. I'm not too strong for this theory. The theory I like best is that they're guinea pigs." The professor said.

"Guinea pigs?"

"That's right. Suppose some other planet wanted room for expansion and saw earth as a prospective colony. Rather than risk unknown diseases, or other deadly possibilities, they would simply land a number of inferior life forms from their planet. If the snake, spider, and rat could adapt themselves without harm, to the earth, then these aliens could take over."

Ross Wooley blinked. "Professor, it seems to me that the weakest point in these theories of yours is the fact that these forms of life have been on earth indefinitely. The cockroach, for instance; it seems to me I've read that it's one of earth's oldest inhabitants. And all of them, snake, spider, rat, have been here since far back in the most primitive periods."

Dumar sipped his drink thoughtfully. "We don't know that the aliens are in any particular hurry. They might be willing to wait hundreds of thousands of years to be sure earth is suitable for their species. To a young civilization like ours a few thousand years seems an endless time, but to a culture that might be many millions of years in age, it's a short period indeed."

"Then, to sum it up, you believe there is other intelligent life in the universe and that, for one reason or other, they've landed alien life forms on earth."

The professor nodded. "That's about it."

THE NEXT name took him across the continent to San Francisco; he'd have hesitated before expending the time and money involved if it hadn't been for the renewed interest Dumar had inspired.

First saying, "This comes from one of your recent lectures," the agent took a news clipping from an envelope and read aloud. " . . . In fact, so chaotic are man's affairs, so unbelievable is it he could thus be his own worst enemy, that one is led to believe aliens from space, enemies for some unknown reason, are in our midst and sabotaging our efforts toward progress. . . ."

Wooley looked up. "I assume the quotation is correct?"

The nationally known lecturer and commentator, in whose office they sat, frowned but nodded. "Substantially."

"What did you mean by it?"

Morton Harrison ran an irritated hand through his famous snow white hair. "I didn't mean anything by it. What in the world are you driving at?"

Ross Wooley returned the clipping to his pocket. "Where did you get the idea that there was a possibility of aliens from space being in our midst?"

The other began to laugh. Finally, "Good heavens, man, has the Department of Security finally reached the point where it's investigating characters out of science-fiction? That illustration meant nothing; I thought of it out of a clear sky."

Wooley had pulled another blank. He sighed in resignation and leaned back in his chair. "All right, Mr. Harrison. But now I'm here, and just for the record, what were you illustrating when you used that example?"

The other got to his feet and flicked his right arm in the gesture so well known to his audiences. Unthinkingly, his voice and movements took on his platform mannerisms. "I was only pointing out that man is his own enemy to such an extent that it seems unbelievable."

"Such as what?" Ross asked.

Morton Harrison tugged at his right ear. "I could give a score of examples, but let me suggest just one or two.

"First, have you ever noticed that persons and organizations that strive for man's advancement are usually

either given the silent treatment, or laughed to scorn? Take our pacifists, for instance. Most people think of them as crackpots. They're made light of in peace, and in times of war, thrown into concentration camps or jail. Almost everyone claims he is against war; why then this contempt for the persons who work hardest to end it?"

Ross Wooley ran a thumbnail over his chin reflectively. "Never thought of it that way," he admitted.

"Let me use another example," Harrison continued. "In this country we like to speak of our freedoms, but, actually, there are few nations where we find more intolerance and persecution. In our Southern states, the example is obvious; and throughout the nation we have anti-Semitism. But that's only the beginning. On the West Coast we have discrimination against those of Japanese descent in some areas, those of Mexican descent in others. In central California there is discrimination against those of Portuguese descent. In the Northern Great Lakes area, the Finns are the butt; in the Southwest, the American Indian.

"Nor is the practice limited to our nation. When we Americans go abroad we often find cutting indication that we are scorned, disliked, considered *pushers* and money grabbers, by other nationalities. It's amusing. America, England, France and the other United Nations sneered at the German and Japanese claims to being supermen, *herrenvolk;* but, actually, we all practice the same delusion."

Wooley stirred as though to protest at least part of the lecture he was being given, but the other held up a restraining hand and went on.

"The point is that instead of encouraging and fighting for such things as the end of war, a better social system. for an end to intolerance and racial discrimination, the average person is actually led to revile, or at least be disdainful of those who work to those ends. We seem to be deliberately fighting against the very things we want most."

Ross Wooley returned his notepad to his pocket and got to his feet. "I suppose I see your point. I don't agree with you entirely but at least I get what you meant in your reference to visitors from space." He held out his hand to be shaken.

THE HARRISON interview had been disappointing and only one other name remained on the list he'd compiled. He scowled at it, not liking a Los Angeles address, even when the man's name was followed by a Ph. D. The City of Angels, home of the crackpot, he told himself. The guy'd probably claim he had a whole cellar full of Martians.

However, Dr. Kenneth Keith, President of the Western Rocket Society, and a leading member of a Fortean group, was too near not to see. Ross Wooley took a plane to L. A. and a cab to the home of the man who had written an article on the possibilities of space travel.

It took him five minutes to convince Mrs. Keith he wasn't a science-fiction fan, trying to meet the President of the Rocket Society for the purpose of arguing over the desirability of using nitric acid and aniline for fuel, instead of nitric acid and vinyl ethyl, in the first moon rocket.

When he finally found himself in the doctor's study, he hesitated before beginning. He'd had so many rebuffs.

The doctor took the initiative. "You're probably here about my article in which I mentioned the presence of beings from other planets on Terra."

Ross Wooley blinked at him. "How. . . ."

Doctor Keith grinned and held up

two hands in an expressive shrug. "It's been suggested, even proven, a score of times. It's only recently come to my attention just why the proof has been ignored, and I think it about time the situation is exposed. That's why I emphasized that although man is on the verge of discovering space travel, he is not the first to utilize it."

Wooley leaned forward excitedly. "Before we go any further, you say that the fact of space travel has been proven a score of times. Name one."

Kenneth Keith got to his feet and strode over to one of the bookcases that lined the walls. He returned with a volume which he tossed into the lap of the Department of Security agent. "There's proof," he said.

Ross Wooley took it up eagerly, read the title and then snorted in disgust. "*Lo!* by Charles Fort."

Keith shot a finger out at him. "That's what I'm talking about. Why were you disgusted when you saw the *proof* I offered?"

The little agent tossed the book contemptuously to a coffee-table which sat before him. "I'm afraid Fort isn't exactly acceptable as proof. He's commonly thought of as a crack. . . ." He stopped, suddenly remembering what Morton Harrison had told him. Those persons who were foremost in fighting man's battle of progress, were scorned as crackpots, nuts, fanatics. So was Fort.

"All right," he said. "I'm listening. Tell me things."

Doctor Kenneth Keith beamed and launched happily into his subject. "In the past century it's been established a score of times, that there's travel to this planet from others. Fort, among others, proves it quite conclusively in his books. I've been aware of this for years, and I've been puzzled because the fact hasn't been widely accepted. I've recently found the reason."

"And what is that reason?" asked Wooley now tensed in expectation.

"We who have suspected the existence of these visitors, have always thought of them as merely that—*visitors*. Most of us supposed they didn't reveal themselves to us openly because they thought of man as a backward creature and not ready for intercourse with more advanced life forms."

Ross Wooley stirred. "But what is it you've discovered?"

The rocket authority stared seriously into the agent's face. "They aren't *visitors*, they're *conquerors*. Possibly we're already property, as Charles Fort suggested, but I'm inclined to think that our potential masters thus far haven't assimilated Terra."

Ross Wooley fingered the skin on his throat, as though he'd just finished shaving and was checking to find whether he'd done a good job. "I'm afraid I don't follow you."

The other jabbed out a finger again to emphasize his point. "No conqueror ever bothers to take over a worthless desert, or an uninhabited mountain range. Before it's worth acquiring an area, it has to be populated by those you can exploit. For hundreds and thousands of years these aliens have visited Terra. We weren't ready for conquest as yet, but they were interested in watching us develop along the lines they thought best; sometimes they even helped.

"As we finally approached an advanced civilization they increasingly took control of our destiny. They wanted us to progress along a certain route, and made sure we did. Among other things: long after war has become ridiculous, they see to it that we remain warlike; they nurture our superstitions and our intolerances; they keep us divided into nations, classes, races, different religious groups.

"We've finally almost reached the point where we have space travel our-

selves and it's at this period they grow more evident. Obviously, they're about ready to assume their role as rulers."

"But why. . . ."

Keith jumped to his feet and paced the room impatiently. "Perhaps they have bred us for soldiers to be used in their interplanetary, or interstellar wars. Perhaps we are to be slaves. All I know is that they are beginning to take over. They're assuming positions of power in our governments, our means of communication of news, our educational system. In this manner, they've been able to laugh Fort, and other far-seeing humans of his type, to scorn."

He broke off his tirade and sat down again to face the undersized agent. "The proof, Mr. Wooley, is endless. Take the recent flying saucers. . . ."

HARVEY TODD, Director of the Department of Security, finally looked up from the papers before him, removed his pipe—long since gone out—from his mouth, and said, "This is quite a report, Ross." His expression was quizzical.

The agent had been sitting to one side, nervously fingering his chin, while his chief read the score or more pages he'd typed up. "Yes, sir," he said.

"I'd like to have your own summation, since you were the one who secured the material. What's your opinion?"

Ross Wooley ran his thumbnail back and forth over his chin. "Briefly this, sir. A helluva long time ago, when Earth was in its infancy, the first explorers from other planets arrived. They left various life forms here from their own world to see whether they would survive. The snake and spider are examples. Then, as man evolved, they assumed a certain amount of direction of his development. The way they directed us is an indication that they aren't exactly benevolent. Nobody could call it that. Never.

"We've finally reached a point where it's to their interest to take a more active part in our affairs. I think they're on the verge of assimilating us. It's been suggested that some of them have already infiltrated high positions in man's educational system, government, and so forth."

The chief smiled broadly. "You really believe that, eh?"

Ross Wooley flushed. "Yes, sir," he said stubbornly.

"That there's an alien underground —perhaps I should call it an *overhead* since they come from the stars —working within the framework of our government?"

Ross Wooley blinked rapidly behind his heavy glasses and nodded. "Yes, sir. And I believe that the most important thing in the world today is to expose these enemies of the human race; root them out, de. . . ."

Harvey Todd interrupted. "Suppose I tell you to drop it, that it's a lot of nonsense?"

"In that case, sir, I'd resign from the department and continue the investigation on my own."

The Department of Security head looked at him for a long moment. Finally, "Okay, Ross. Sorry." He pressed a button on his desk and a section of the wall slid back silently. Two strangely clad figures stepped out of the passage behind it. They weren't human—not exactly.

The chief eyed his agent laconically. "You were right in believing we of Aldebaran—it's Aldebaran, not Mars or Venus—have assumed positions of power in your fantastic Earth governments."

He turned to the first of the strangers, who had covered Wooley with an ugly weapon. "Dispose of him in the usual way."

Ross Wooley's hand streaked for his left shoulder. A pale light gleamed momentarily; he dropped his gun, stiffened, and began to slump forward. The two aliens grabbed him as he fell and began to drag his body to the passageway.

"Just a moment," Harvey Todd called. "Take along this report. There're several names on it that'll call for a visit from us, a Professor Dumar and a Doctor Keith, in particular."

He glanced at the pile of papers on his desk and sighed. "Now get out of here. I'm up to my ears in work."

The Shipwrecked Bogey Man

(Continued from page 87)

—it *was* working. A low-pitched, muted hum reached his ears, and he watched the bell-like upturned crystal grow brighter and brighter.

The Bogey Man moved quickly. Hands reached toward the apparatus, touched the bars here and there, did many things that to Peter had no meaning. He watched the horn, fascinated, and saw the black bubble come out and rest and grow. The blackness moved up and around, even in the dark room it was a visible pulsing thing of utter night. Then it grew no more, and hung there. That's it! marveled Peter, the ship—the corridor—and I helped to build—

THE DOOR of the room flew open and his father's shout crashed into Peter's ears. He looked up, shocked, to see Dad framed there in the hall light, but Dad, too, was rigid and silent, watching. And then with a last wild glance, Peter saw the Bogey Man, hands over eyes, plunge desperately into the hovering black sphere. The glimmering body vanished, and they waited. The sphere hung there motionless, and just as motionless Peter and his father stared into the blackness.

Mother was there. She had made no sound, and yet was suddenly with them, standing beside Dad. She gripped his arm, and he looked at her, startled. He cursed, walked into the room, and then with obvious intent went over to the wall where the socket was.

Peter yelled with fear. "No, Dad! No!"

His father looked back from his crouch beside the wall. "No?" he asked in a hard voice. "Why not?"

"Don't," begged Peter. "Please don't. He's got to get home. In a minute it'll collapse. Just a minute, Dad!"

His mother reached him and caught him to her. "Sh . . . Peter" she said, and rocked him on her chest. "No, no," she said, "It'll be all right."

"Please, don't!" he pleaded.

"Ha!" snorted Dad, and he pulled out the plug—

There was nothing where the sphere had been. The crystal was dead. The apparatus remained on the floor of the room, lifeless in the hall light.

Dad stood up quietly, still staring into the center of the room. Mother held Peter tight and ran her hand over his head.

And Peter struggled in misery and despair to free himself, and he shouted with rage at his father, "You've done it now. You've finished him. You've wrecked him again!"

Forbidden Fruit

Marooned by the space police on an unknown world, that murderer thought he could work his will on the child-like natives. No one had told him that in the code of the stars, punishment would find a way to fit the crime.

By Kris Neville

THE CAPTAIN walked into the officers' mess after coffee. The new third mate, just out of the Academy, started to rise. The Captain motioned him back into his seat.

After a while, the mate asked, "Have you heard the reports over space news?"

The Captain poured the coffee into his saucer. "No."

"About Johnson. Earth's in a stew."

"They say it's unfair," the mate continued. "There have been stories of criminals building up Empires. We are dumping the refuse of humanity on the innocent natives, making others suffer for our mistakes."

"The law says a man convicted of a capital crime shall be exiled," the Captain said.

"Yes, but to set him down on a planet whose natives are weak and defenseless—where he can rule whole races by his slightest whim—that's not right."

The purser gave Johnson fifteen days ration. They sent him down to the surface of the planet in an escape ship.

He got out and stood in the warm air, cursing them. They left him there.

Murder had been his crime. He had made a clever job of it, too. He killed for the love of killing. A clueless murder on a dark night. A repeat performance in a week. He struck again and again, senselessly. Eventually, of course, he struck once too often and his luck ran out.

He had always been far too clever to underestimate his opponents. His knowledge of human psychology was flawless. He was caught only because

fate had dealt a hand off the bottom of the deck. The councilor had examined his personality, and, with a wry smile, named the planet most suited to it.

Johnson felt sorry for himself; he stood surveying the planet and fuming against the evil machinations of a fickle fortune.

It wasn't an unpleasant little planet. On the contrary, deep-green forests and quiet streams made it beautiful to look at. The blue-green heavens arched high overhead, and the air blew springlike. Strange orange fruit gave promise of food.

If it hadn't been for the natives, Johnson might have sat down and starved to death out of sheer pique.

The natives gave him direction; his wrath and pent-up savagery saw promise of a satisfactory outlet.

ONLY ONE look at the natives assured him of his own superiority. They were dwarfed and twisted. He automatically thought of them as "The Runts." They were skinny. They wore huge, vacant, moronic smiles. Their lips were blubbery. But they were not so repulsive that he couldn't bring himself to tolerate them.

They came upon him in numbers; but they were peaceful, almost childlike. They ran out of the forest and danced around him in a joyful circle. They tugged at his shirt and smiled up at him. They capered and giggled. They led him, in a graceful dance, back into the forest, and directed him, gently but firmly, toward their village.

The village wasn't much. An arrangement of huts, radiating outward from a huge, central structure.

They entered the village in a pastoral procession: a rustic setting, bucolic natives. All that was needed was the pipes of Pan.

Johnson began to feel somewhat satisfied. He might even come to enjoy the experience. It offered possibilities. He looked at the natives, and he rubbed his huge, hairy hands together in anticipation. There would be rare sport. . . .

The Runts led him straight to the central building and installed him there. They waited upon him as they would a king, which, doubtless, they thought him to be.

There was only one thing that gave rise to doubts. Johnson discovered that one of the Runts could speak a smattering of English. That was proof that someone had come before him to the planet. Another exile? he wondered. That was the only probable explanation. And that conclusion, since the man was no longer in evidence, gave him pause. However, there was nothing to excite definite suspicion, and he settled down to wait watchfully for the first overt act. Then he intended to demonstrate conclusively that the Runts couldn't put anything over on him.

For a week he waited. And during that time he lived regally.

He was careful of his temper. At the end of that time, however, there was a minor incident. The natives did not seem to resent it.

He had boxed the ears of a servant girl. She had only smiled vacantly back at him and licked her lips. Later he noticed that she had walked proudly through the village as if it were a sign of honor rather than a mark of abuse.

Then, the next day, one of the Runts, in bringing him water, had spilled some across his naked chest. The water was icy, and, in a moment of passion, he broke the native's arm. The Runt had whined a little and slunk off, trailing the arm.

Johnson had waited, then, for an attack that he felt sure must come. None came. Life in the village continued its even tenor. He spent a

nervous night over it. But the next morning the Runt was back, his arm in a sling, and the complacent smile back on his face.

He cursed the Runt savagely for an idiot, but the Runt only smiled.

Johnson licked his lips and decided definitely that he was going to enjoy staying with these considerate people. But still, he was uneasy. Things didn't fit.

He could feel a sense of rising resentment within the Runts. He thought he saw hatred in their eyes. But they never moved against him; they served him uncomplainingly, and seemed unduly solicitous of his welfare.

THE NIGHT of the feast, however, it was different. All his servants left him for the ceremonies, and, although he stormed at them from his hut to "cut out that infernal damn' racket so a man can get some sleep," they ignored him completely. The celebrations continued far into the night and the smell of burning flesh was sickening.

Johnson was usually an astute and careful observer. He was, however, on this occasion, lulled into a sense of security. He saw nothing dangerous in the feast, and he deduced nothing from it.

Until now he had never seen the natives eat anything but fruit, and the fact that the carcass the "hunting party" dragged into the village had obviously been dead several days in the sun, meant nothing to him. From it he might have deduced a very significant fact: that they had not killed the animal, but had found it dead. He could have concluded further that the Runts would not kill for food. The conclusion would have been valid. Their religion prohibited it.

He would have noticed, too, had he considered the feast of more consequence, that one of the hunters—the one who had been injured in retrieving the carcass from a swamp—was given first selection of meat. And that this first selection seemed to be considered an honor.

All he did notice was that the whole affair was a savage orgy that turned even his stomach, and he was glad when the last glowing coal sputtered out and the villagers crept to their huts.

The feast did serve to highlight one fact, however. Johnson realized it the next morning. His rations were low. So far he had avoided eating any of the native produce, but now such a course was no longer possible. He would have to start living off of the land.

And, recalling the sight of the dead animal last evening, he decided to try fruit until he could organize a hunting party to bring in fresh meat.

He searched out the native who could speak English and led him back to his hut.

"Food," he demanded imperiously.

The native continued to stare vacantly.

He repeated the word louder.

The native bobbed his head up and down and made no move.

Johnson restrained his temper. He made motions toward his mouth and went through the process of chewing.

The Runt brightened. "Ah. . . . Whooood!" He scurried off.

In anticipation, Johnson allowed himself one of his few remaining cigarettes while he waited.

He did not have to wait long. The native returned with a woven platter; on the platter were two ripe, orange fruit.

They looked appetizing. He reached out for one of them. The Runt smiled.

Johnson stopped his hand in midmotion.

The native frowned.

Johnson drew back his hand,

puzzled by the native's reaction.

Before him were two pulpy fruit. As near as he could tell, they were both the same. Still. It was obvious that the native felt they were not.

He reached for the other one, and the Runt howled, "Noooo!"

Johnson hesitated; he turned the matter over in his mind.

There was something the matter with one of the things before him.

He cut them open. On the inside, one of them had a bluish tint. He pointed to it.

The native said, "Noooo!"

Johnson ordered more of the fruit. It took him some time to make the native understand.

Finally he got two more. He cut them. He pointed to the one with the bluish tint.

The Runt said no again.

Johnson looked at the Runt narrowly.

He could not understand why they had given him a choice. That was something he would never understand. It involved a concept alien to him, being, as it was, the product of a culture where killing under any circumstance was unthinkable.

Although he could not understand why they gave him a choice, he understood, nevertheless, why they would want to poison him. There was an idea planted in fertile soil.

He smiled grimly. He handed the Runt a piece of the bluish tinted fruit. He motioned that the native should eat it.

The native ate it, still smiling. He then pointed to the rest and to Johnson; he made a twisted face and simulated agony.

Johnson got the idea. The Runt was unaffected by it, but he could not expect the same results.

Then Johnson executed his masterstroke. He thrust the untinted fruit at the native. The Runt ate it with evident satisfaction.

The Runt wiped his lips and smiled up at him. Johnson hit him in the face.

TWO DAYS later, Johnson was hungry. He had tramped the forest in search of game. He had found none. His rations were gone. Finally he had to face the situation squarely.

There was food; plenty of it. It was all around him, and ever at his elbow, a Runt to smile or frown. He knew that the Runts could tell which food would poison him, perhaps because of previous experiences with his race, and he knew that, in the last analysis, he would have to judge from their reactions. To judge falsely would mean death.

He grew irritable. He struck out petulantly at any Runt who came near him. They suffered his ill humor in silence. He knew that their hatred grew.

This, it occurred to him, was not all to his disadvantage. In fact, it was the only way by which he could discover the truth. They were a simple people, and if he fanned the fires that smoldered in them, if he made them hate him enough, they would surely suggest the poison fruit to him. Thus, by acting contrary to their recommendation, he would eat the non-poisonous. Johnson chuckled and told himself, once more, that he was very clever, indeed.

He committed a senselessly brutal act in public when he was certain that all would see him. He smiled while he did it, and he smiled when he felt their hatred swirl around him as almost a physical force.

Then he summoned the natives around him. They came sullenly, he thought. He stood on the platform by his hut. He made a series of suitable gestures.

He held up the bluish-tinted fruit. The crowd pressed closer. Slowly their faces changed; slowly a negative howl grew out of them.

He held up the other fruit. Their faces were transformed by smiles.

There could be no doubt about which one they wanted him to eat.

He stepped down from the platform; he entered his hut. The crowd pressed close around the hut, watching.

Very deliberately, he lifted the bluish-tinted fruit to his mouth. They howled and twisted their faces in pain.

He studied them, and he knew that they hated him. As he hesitated, they increased the tempo of their horrible pantomime. They gnashed their teeth and rolled in the dirt; they howled and screamed.

There was no doubt, now, in his mind. He bit into the bluish fruit. He imagined their chagrin. The first taste was delicious. Then he was twisted in the agony that the Runts had so forcefully predicted. He fell to the ground and writhed. The Runts were quiet now. Having done everything they could to save his life, they waited expectantly for his death. Morally, they were blameless.

That night, the natives had another feast. Perhaps it was even more savage than the last. The girl who was slapped, the man with the broken arm, and the man with the empty, gaping eye socket were all highly honored. They got first choice; to them, the delicacies.

It was a night of merry-making, and, at its conclusion, the whole village sent up a prayer to their alien gods to send them more animals who were so stupid that they obligingly killed themselves, in spite of all urging to the contrary.

The Planet-Smashers

(Continued from page 24)

knife was in her hand. I tried to seize it as the Martian's blows knocked me backward. But suddenly there were other shouts, looming figures in the gloom, rushing us, engulfing us.

I was able to fire once—futile shot that struck the deck-ceiling and showered us with its colored sparks. Then I fell, with men on top of me, pinning me down; and I had a glimpse of Dianne's white face as she stood with her captors gripping her.

We were caught!

CHAPTER VII

Suicide Earthman!

THEY PULLED me to my feet. Then Timko was here, facing me. "So? The Earthman thinks he is so clever!" He stared at me grimly as he added, "It is well for you that the Zar-Tor wants hostages!"

He turned to one of the men gripping me. "Put him in the lock room, Meegar. Keep your weapon muzzle on him from now to Venta, or your life will pay for it!"

"I understand." The burly, scowling Meegar glared at me, dug his gun into my ribs with an extra prod. "You come with me."

The steel-barred door to the Eq-2 prison cell was here near at hand. "Take the girl to the salon with the passengers," Timko commanded.

There was just an instant as the excited Martians moved away when Dianne was able to whisper.

"Jac, my heat-gun, I hid it in the deck scupper—" They shoved her past me as Meegar roughly pushed me to the cell door. He thrust me in; the door clanked and locked after me. Through the lattice of bars, his wide-shouldered figure was a silhouette with the deck glow behind him. Then his face, close against the bars, glared in at me.

"You heard him, Earthman! My gun is on you."

The prison room had this single door and a single window, its glassite pane covered on the inside with a lattice of steel bars like the door. There was a small chair and a narrow bunk. The room was unlighted, with only the deck glow, and starlight now filtering in the window.

I slumped and sat on the side of the bed, trying to think what I could do.

"I'm hungry," I said. "Am I going to be here all these last hours—no food or drink?"

"Timko will send them," Meegar growled through the door bars. "Save your breath, Earthman."

FOR ME it was a long, despairing eternity as I sat there on the bed, idly watching the starlight at the barred window. The bars cast long shadows on the floor, a black barred pattern. Then the starlight was gone as the Eq-2 dropped down through the atmosphere for another stop.

At my door Meegar hardly moved. There was just his silhouette, with his gun-muzzle pointing in. Now, with the letdown of this hopeless imprisonment, I realized how tired I was. I sat watching the window—the starlight gone, the mist of the atmosphere, then the dimness of an air-run out there, and the colored sheen of Festival lights. . . . Another bomb detonator being taken off. . . .

We were up in the starlight again in a few moments, with another interminable interval . . . another brief stop as the dark details of this grim and terrible voyage proceeded so smoothly. . . .

"I tell you I'm hungry, Meegar. I am a hostage. You heard Tor-Timko say it. Go tell them I want food and drink."

He hardly stirred. "It will come."

It came at last. I was desperately tense again. I was unarmed. They had searched me and taken my gun before they thrust me in here; but now, when the cell door opened and the food came—perhaps I could jump them?

I had no chance even for a wild plan. Meegar's weapon backed me to the window before another crewman opened the bars and thrust in the food and drink.

"There it is, Earthman. Enjoy yourself!"

I sat eating and drinking while the Eq-2 made another stop. For a moment I stood at the window. The Festival was on the other side of the ship here, but its riot of color brightened the little air-run, and I saw the cylinder taken out and the black-cloaked agent slinking away with it.

They had changed the guard at my door now. Like Meegar, this fellow stood silent, with his gun alert.

"What's your name?" I said.

"Jarrok. Hold your tongue."

I finished my meal. For a time I slumped on the bed. . . .

I knew that I had slept. I opened my eyes. Nothing had changed. Starlight was at the window. The guard, Jarrok, was standing motionless outside the barred door. As I stirred, his gun rose. How long had I slept? I only knew I was refreshed, with my mind sharpened so that all at once I was thinking things that made my heart race with a last, wildly desperate hope.

A way to die quickly perhaps . . . but I had to try it. . . .

I lay pondering, fully awake now, every instant more tense and alert. Than I sat up.

"Is that you, Jarrok?" I mumbled. "I—I guess I slept. Where are we?"

"Next we stop at Menling," he growled.

"Good," I said. "Soon this voyage will be over." Menling was on Meridian 330 on the Equator. Differing

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MANY persons use such expressions as "Leave them lay there" and "Mary was invited as well as myself." Still others say "between you and I" instead of "between you and me." It is astonishing how often "who" is used for "whom" and how frequently we hear such glaring mispronunciations as "for MID able," "ave NOO," and "KEW pon." Few know whether to spell certain words with one or two "c's" or "m's" or "r's" or with "ie" or "ei," and when to use commas in order to make their meaning absolutely clear. Most persons use only common words — colorless, flat, ordinary. Their speech and their letters are lifeless, monotonous, humdrum.

Why Most People Make Mistakes

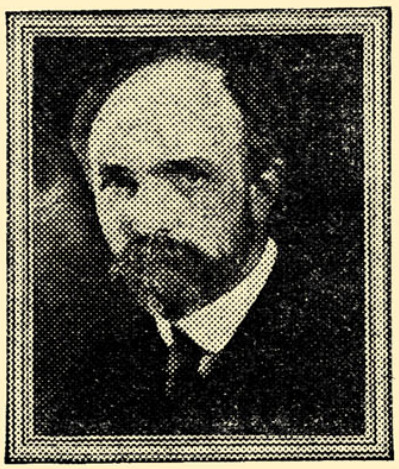
What is the reason so many of us are deficient in the use of English and find our careers stunted in consequence? Why is it some cannot spell correctly and others cannot punctuate? Why do so many find themselves at a loss for words to express their meaning adequately? The reason for the deficiency is clear. Sherwin Cody discovered it in scientific tests, which he gave thousands of times. *Most persons do not write and speak good English simply because they never formed the habit of doing so.*

What Cody Did at Gary

The formation of any habit comes only from constant practice. Shakespeare, you may be sure, never studied rules. No one who writes and speaks correctly thinks of *rules* when he is doing so.

Here is our mother-tongue, a language that has built up our civilization, and without which we should all still be muttering savages! Yet some schools, by wrong methods, have made it a study to be avoided—the hardest of tasks instead of the most fascinating of games! For years it has been a crying disgrace.

In that point lies the real difference between Sherwin Cody and these schools! Here is an illustration: Some years ago Mr. Cody



SHERWIN CODY

was invited by the author of the famous Gary System of Education to teach English to all upper-grade pupils in Gary, Indiana. By means of unique practice exercises, *Mr. Cody secured more improvement in these pupils in five weeks than previously had been obtained by similar pupils in two years under old methods.* There was no guesswork about these results. They were proved by scientific comparisons. Amazing as this improvement was, more interesting still was the fact that the children were "wild" about the study. It was like playing a game!

The basic principle of Mr. Cody's new method is habit-forming. Anyone can learn to write and speak correctly by constantly using the correct forms. But how is one to know in each case what is correct? Mr. Cody solves this problem in a simple, unique, sensible way.

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Suppose he himself were standing forever at your elbow. Every time you mispronounced or misspelled a word, every time you violated correct grammatical usage, every time you used the wrong word to express what you meant, suppose you could hear him whisper: "That is wrong, it should be thus and so." In a short time you would habitually use the correct form and the right words in speaking and writing.

If you continued to make the same mistakes over and over again, each time patiently he would tell you what was right. He would, as it were, be an everlasting mentor beside you—a mentor who would not laugh at you but who would, on the contrary, support and help you. The 100% Self-Correcting Device does exactly this thing. It is Mr. Cody's silent voice behind you, ready to speak out whenever you commit an error. It finds your mistakes and concentrates on them. You do not need to study anything you already know. There are no rules to memorize.

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from Earth, which changes from one day to the next at Meridian 180, on Venus the change is made in the zone between Menling and Venta—the Festival-midnight now at Menling, and two hours later, midnight of the following night at Venta.

I slumped back on the bed. My best chance would be just after we left Menling. Timko would be up in the control room then.

AT MENLING, the private air-run was dim like the others. I stood grimly at the window as the last detonator cylinder was taken away—twelve of them now. With only the futile opposition Dianne and I had so briefly offered, the monstrous Martian plot was completed! A ring of planted, triggered atom bombs of monstrous power, thirty degrees of longitude apart, studded the Venus Equator!

Two hours from now, again the Eq-2 would be at Venta. An hour after that the simultaneously timed bombs would detonate—the titan dagger thrusts at its core splitting the planet apart. The sudden end of a world. . . .

The glaring, dazzling radiance of the Scarlet Festival beamed in my window as the Eq-2 rose from the air-run. It was a thicket grove here at Menling—a spreading fairyland of flowered thickets in which the White Princess and her girls were dancing. In the darkness high overhead, a balloon platform was poised, wholly concealed by the black shadow-beam upon it.

Now at the Festival climax, from the invisible platform the Scarlet Princess and a horde of her girls were leaping into the air. With blood-red little parachutes opening and swaying above them, they came fluttering down the thousand-foot drop . . . scarlet moths fluttering in the floodlights from below . . . landing, and with flame-hair flying, rushing to battle. . . .

The gay, sensuous scene dropped away. Grimly I turned from the window, faced with my desperate reality . . . my last wild hope.

"Jarrok, Jarrok! Have you poisoned me? Oh—"

I suddenly slumped in the center of the room. I was clutching at my middle, groaning.

"What is it, Earthman? What's the matter?"

"That food—that drink—" I staggered to the bed, sat down. "Killed me," I groaned. "You fools—fools—if only you knew—"

Jarrok's call brought another crewman. "Something's the matter with the Earthman!"

"Bring Timko!" I gasped. "No! Get me to him. I tell you—if I die— Get me to Timko, I tell you—carry me —help me—"

They were startled. "He's sick; he thinks he's poisoned!"

"That's impossible! Timko said to guard his life."

"Yes. Important. The Zar-Tor wants him for hostage."

They were confused, in doubt what they should do. With a prayer that I could convince them, I made my stricken plight sound as urgent as I dared.

"Timko, get me to Timko. There is something I must tell him. Oh, I cannot die, with a secret like that locked in my mind—the great Zar-Tor himself would want to hear it!"

They had unlocked the bars of the door. I sat slumped, groaning, ignoring it. "Oh, help me, take me—to Timko—"

Surely they had to think it best not to take the responsibility here. . . .

"Hold him, Bahl, if he can walk, help him." Jarrok stood back, with his gun-muzzle pointing at me. "He says some secret—we'd better take him quickly—"

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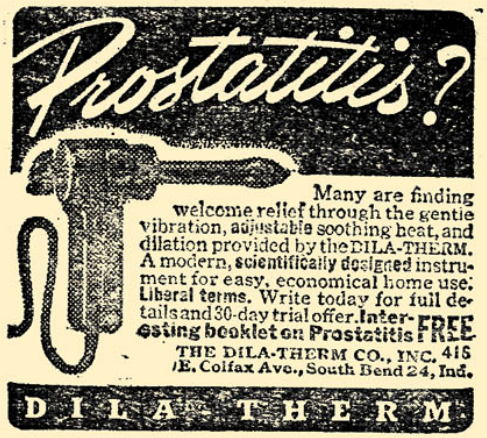

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"I—I can walk," I gasped. "Help me—"

Bahl gripped me, supporting me as I staggered. Jarrok, with his poised weapon, was at my elbow. Out on the narrow side deck, groaning and as though my knees had buckled, I slumped and fell. I had tried to gauge where Dianne had been standing when the Martians had leaped upon us here and caught us. I remembered her furtive whisper to me. There would be no time now to fumble for her heat-gun. As I fell, groaning, my hand was sliding into the scupper in the darkness.

"Lift him up, Bahl," Jarrok muttered.

"Yes, I have him. Can't you walk, Earthman?"

"I—I'm trying—"

WITH BAHL helping me, I staggered up, and the little heat-gun was in my pocket!

Bahl held my arm, helping me as he led me to the ladder, with my knees buckling and my feet dragging. We went up the ladder. Starlight gleamed down through the dome; the Eq-2 was leveling off, speeding toward Venta. The radio room was empty. In the control room, Timko was just handing the levers over to the routine pilot as my captors brought me staggering in.

"Well! What's this?" Timko roared.

"The Earthman, he's sick. Something's the matter with him," Bahl said.

"We didn't know. He thinks he's dying," Jarrok gasped it. "A secret, before he should die—something for the great Zar-Tor himself—"

"Timko! I'll tell it!" I groaned. I was staggering, and I got free of Bahl's supporting clutch and lurched with my back against the wall. The four men here were all in front of me. Timko was only a few feet away.

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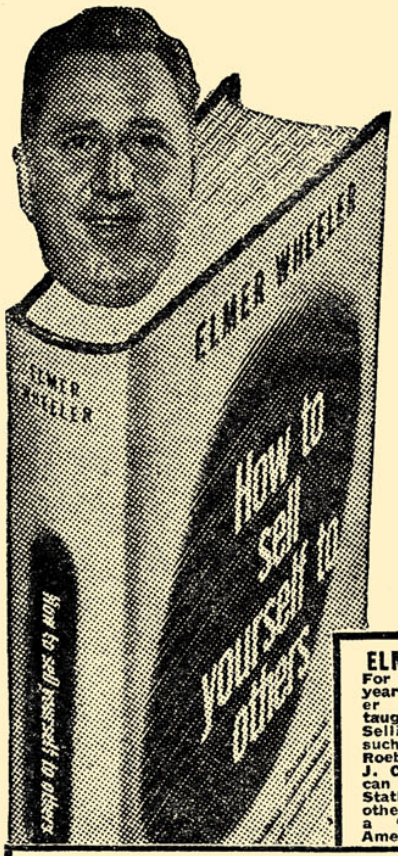

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"An Earth plot," I said. "When the Zar-Tor finds out—" Suddenly I was erect, stiff and tense and steady, my hand steady as I held it at my hip with the muzzle of my gun covering the Martian leader! "Don't move, Timko! My life is gone. What do *I* care, so long as you die first!"

I ripped it out and surely it carried conviction for I meant it!

"Why—why—" Timko recoiled, his arms spread wide over his head. "Don't, don't kill me—"

My gaze flicked just for a second on the other men. "Timko dies an instant quicker than you can kill me," I snapped. "Do you doubt it, Timko? Tell them—"

Oh, I had gauged him right, this craven fellow! I could see the color fading under the cosmetics of his cheeks.

"Tell them to drop their weapons, Timko!"

"Bahl, Jarrok, do as he says!"

Their guns clanked to the grid. My words and Timko's faltering agreement backed them into a corner of the control room. At the levers, the young pilot stood frozen.

"Lock the levers! Get out of here," I told the pilot. "Go below. Tell the crew this suicide Earthman is in charge! I expect to die, but there will never be a second but that your leader will die first! You believe that, don't you, Timko? Tell them all!"

THE DEATH of a world, millions of people, of what importance was a death or a life here? But there was a difference to Timko! Certainly he had envisaged the death of Venus without quailing, when his own escape had seemed assured.

"Do what he says," Timko gasped.

I jerked my head at Jarrok and Bahl. "You two go with the pilot! Go to the salon. Send the Sirrata Dianne up here at once! You'll die with my heat-flash through your heart, Timko, if she is not here, unharmed, in sixty seconds."

"S-send her," Timko murmured. "Send her."

"And you three—you tell your men, if the engines falter, Timko will die and I'll plunge the ship! Death for us all!" I called it after them grimly as they dashed away.

Timko and I were left alone. "Take the levers, Timko! Stand with your back to me!"

As he obeyed, I snapped down the blinds of the windows, and in a moment Dianne was here, white-faced and grim, but her eyes were gleaming as she mutley gazed at me inquiringly.

"Lock up the radio room, Dianne! Pull down its blinds! Leave the connecting door open!"

She hastened to do it. I slammed the control door. Locked it. We were barricaded in here. I handed Timko the engine room communication tube.

"Tell your men at the engines that if anything goes wrong I will crash the ship! Tell them, Timko."

He told them. "And we're flying to Venta on the regular course," I said. "Tell them to stand by for your landing signals, or we will crash."

My muzzle was at his back as he commanded the engine crew.

"The radio sender," Dianne said. "You want me to—"

"Yes, of course." I knew Dianne could operate the sender. She had one of her own, her hobby, on the unofficial length, at home in the Embassy. "Call your father, Dianne! Then get him on the audiphone if you can. Tell him everything. Have the cities searched for the bombs—whatever can be done—"

"Yes! Yes, Jac, I understand!"

"And have the Venus Police board us at Venta!"

I prodded Timko's back as I stood close beside him. "Land us skillfully, Timko. If I drill you, we would crash!,

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That would be too bad, wouldn't it? I'm watching the flight indicators. Don't let us leave our course!"

Dianne was at the radio-sender, snapping out the call. Then presently she had voice connection; I could hear her tense swift voice as she was talking with her father. Then she came back to the control room. Her grim, strained face was pallid.

I could envisage the frantic activity in the Embassy, the calls to the various cities, with desperate hunting for the hidden bombs; the search starting now in Venta itself for the bomb there.

Here in the barricaded control room of the Eq-2, we stood tense and silent through the remaining minutes of the fatal voyage. With my gun against him, Timko stood mute, swinging the levers, watching the indicators with terror that some error would creep in. But I saw they were running true; at correct altitude and speed, we clung to the doomed planet's Equator.

The engines did not fail. Well did the brigands down below realize that they could not trifle with me, and at intervals, with shaking voice, Timko reminded them. . . .

Then Timko was ringing the signals; the jet-streams ceased, the propellers and 'copters came on, with the starlight obscured now as we dropped down through the heavy cloud-mists of the Venus atmosphere.

The blue-water grove was dark and silent now, this midnight of the day after the Festival. But the air-run glared with lights, and searchbeams darted up and clung to us. In its distant rack, I could see the Eq-1, ready to start on its alternating flight; but of course the run had now been cancelled.

The air-run was dotted with dark figures as we settled into place. Beyond a stray wild shot or two, the terrified brigands offered no re-

sistance as the Venus Police swarmed aboard.

ONLY an hour left now. The terrible moments of that last desperate hour are blurred in my memory. Dianne was taken to the Embassy, but for a time I lingered at the airrun, doing what I could.

It was so horribly little. Futilely we sent out the two photos she had taken, and the Martian agents in Carolah and Mizrah were hunted.

Only an hour. . . . Then half an hour. It seemed that two or three of the bombs had been found and nullified. But so many were left it could make little difference.

And now only fifteen minutes remained to us. The end of the world. . . . The sure presage of it was here everywhere around me now—the white faces of the scurrying officials, the rings and buzzing of the communication instruments . . . the terrified cries of the milling crowds of people thronging the streets, dazed with their doom upon them.

There had been some official talk that some of us might escape in a space-flyer—that the rocket-ship of the brigands might be found and used. . . . All that came to nothing. The swift-flying minutes went by, and suddenly everyone realized that now there was no time to do anything.

Ten minutes left . . . "Dianne . . . Dianne. . . ." I found myself murmuring her name. . . . There was nothing to do now, everything abandoned . . . "Dianne . . . dear. . . ."

I realized that I was running through the thickets of the slope pushing through the hysterical crowds until I got to the Embassy. Dianne was in the lower foyer, with a mute and silent group.

"Jac—Jac—"

We clung to each other, with the big clock above us ticking away the last few draining sands of our lives.

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"Dianne, darling. . . ."

We crouched on the floor, holding each other . . . dazed and blurred . . .

Through our closed eyelids, the glare was dazzling. . . . I know now that in that instant, the whole of the planet was bathed with that white glare. . . . The blast and roar of the concussion was monstrous. . . .

With a dim and puzzled wonderment I held Dianne. . . . I was still alive. . . . I saw the Venta detonation then through the great glassite window at the end of the foyer—a monstrous jet of upflung gases, concentrated to be like a titan sword-thrust, knifing up through the atmosphere, hurtling out into Space!

And we were still alive, with only a litter here in the room, and the winds outside, tumbling like a crazy storm!

Dazed, I was murmuring, "The bomb-thrusts—not downward—harmlessly upward. . . ."

Now Dianne was babbling, "I tried to do it—I wasn't sure—I just hoped—"

It was what she had so tried to tell me, but always something had interrupted. That brief moment when, before the Eq-2 had reached Carolah, Dianne had been alone in the cage-room with the detonators. She had managed to reverse the directional indicators, so that the titan thrusts of the great bombs had not been downward to split the planet, but harmlessly upward into space.

Concentrated beams of the radioactive gases so swiftly rising that only far above the Venus atmosphere could they mushroom out, lost and gone! The monstrous Martian plot to smash a world had passed into grim and gruesome memory.

I crouched, still dazed, holding the shuddering Dianne. It is good to hold the one you love in your arms, with the knowledge that life and happiness lie ahead of you.

Omega and the Wolf-Girl

(Continued from page 41)

sat molding it idly, while his eyes remained unfocused on the shelf before him. Now Earth was faint in the distance, with Mars looming up large and red before them, but he was less certain than before of what awaited him there. Sanctuary or slavery—he could not tell. Somewhere within the notes before him must lie the answer; but his mind went on pacing an endless circle, unable to break from the ruts it had worn, and the key eluded him.

When he began his manuscript a week before, it had seemed so simple, and the ink and candle were still there to remind him of the plan. Among men, it might have worked. But even human motives were uncertain, and these strange men from Mars were of another race. He had mixed with them, supped with their quiet commander, and listened to the tales of Mars that Jaluir told so well. But he did not know them; nor could he hope to before his children were old enough to curse or bless him for the outcome; and that would be too late.

With a sudden sweep of his arm, he knocked the things from the shelf into a trash container, and swung around—just in time to see one of the side doors swing open quietly, and an old and familiar figure slip from behind it.

"Gram!"

"Naturally. Who else would spend twelve days watching you through a one-way mirror to see whether she had a fool for a grandson?" But the strain in her voice ruined the attempt at humor, and she gave it up. "I found the candle in your bag, Omega, and I knew you'd find other ways if I destroyed it. So I made an agreement with Jaluir and my stuff was on the plane when you awoke. . . . And yet,

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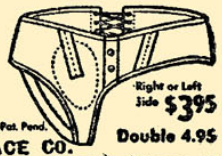

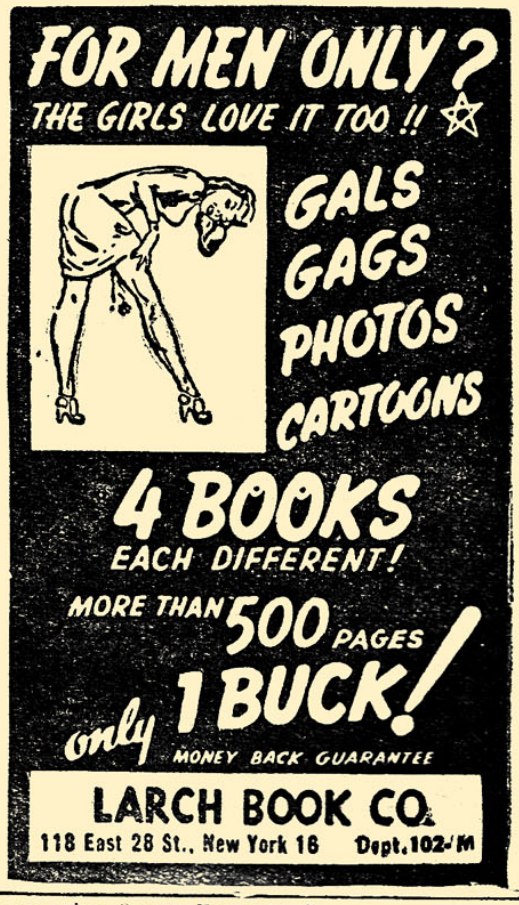

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at the end, I wouldn't have saved you. If there's any difference, I'd rather see my descendants slaves than cowards!"

Omega shook his head dully. "It wasn't suicide, Gram. I thought they might dump me and my notes at once if they were slavers, like the man in your story who tried to cover up and escape punishment for carelessness. Or if they were friends, they'd wait until they read my notes and found out how to revive me."

"Umm. And you'd have no responsibility either way, eh? No, boy. Men could have colonized the planets ten years before the Cataclysm; but they were too busy with their fears. Until the last minute, they were so afraid of war that all they could do was prepare for it, and nothing else. The survivors could have found ways to get to all the valleys and multiply again, but they gave up and sat blubbering about the dirty trick fate played on them. We've been a race of irresponsible, sniveling brats! And now it's time we grew up out of our nightmares and accepted our responsibilties."

Gram shrugged, dismissing the subject, and turned toward the doorway to the hall. "Come on, boy. Jaluir says we're almost there, and we might as well see what it looks like."

But Omega could not dismiss the subject so readily. It was good to have her old familiar strength beside him, but in the final analysis, she could not help. The decision he had been forced to make was his responsibility, and no other could share it. Men had had their faults, and they were great ones. They had come up too fast, and their cleverness had outstripped their wisdom. But no single individual could deny the race one more chance for the good that was in it.

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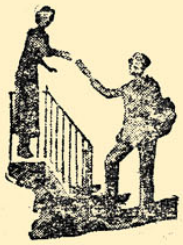

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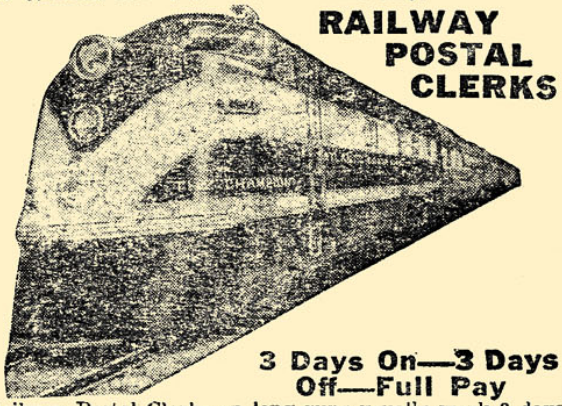

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Now they reached the end of the passage, and already the red disc of Mars was pushing back the cold and the darkness of space before them. Omega sighed gently. He could only pray that it was an omen of the future—and wonder.

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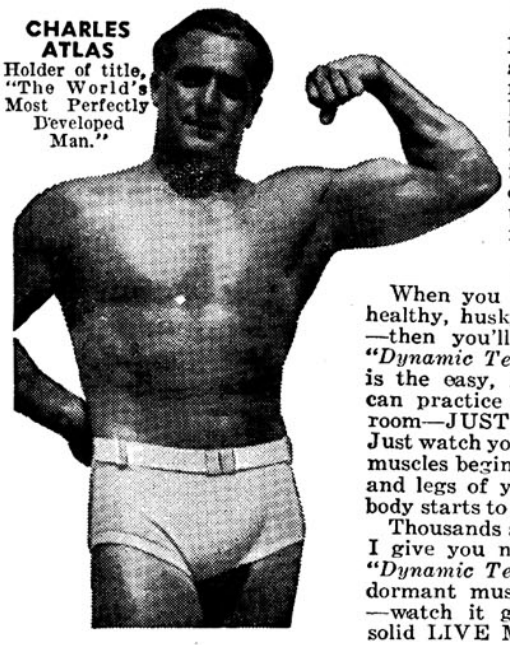

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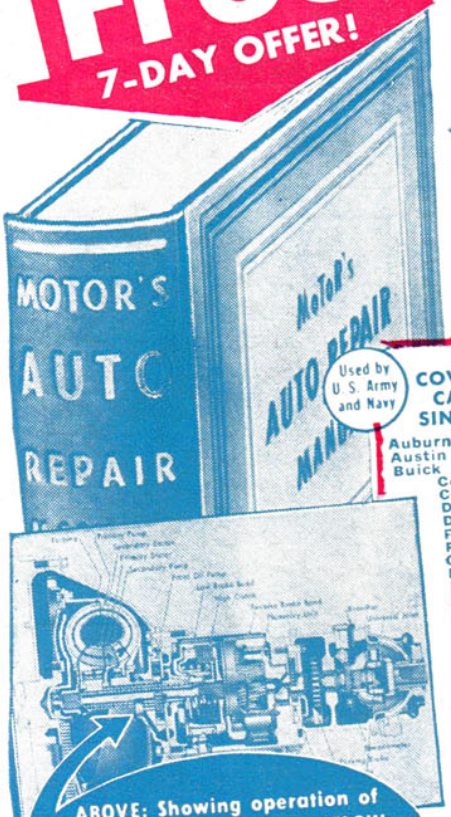

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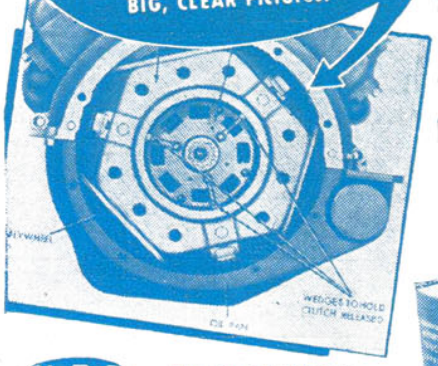

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